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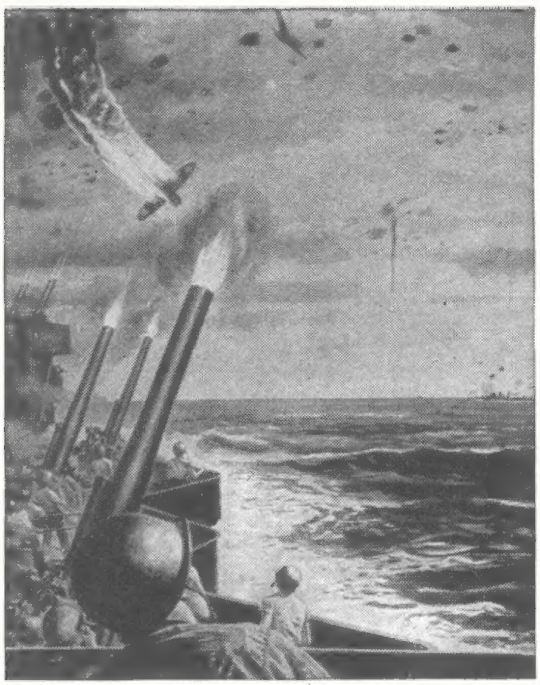

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BY JOHN PAUL JONES

When grim obstacles come between Katherine Burke and the man she loves, she faces a difficult emotional problem and makes her decision like a true daughter of the West! 13

Three Other Complete Novelets

BIG TIM'S DAUGHTER . . . . . Marian O'Hearn 48

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THE HEART RUSTLER . . . . . Thelma Knoles 66

Charming Noel Farley was green in the ways of the West—but she proved that she was true-blue to the man who doubted her affection!

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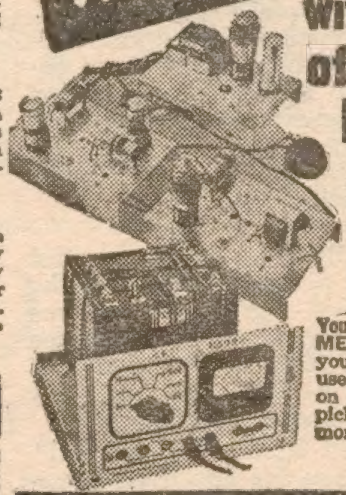

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A Department for Readers

Around the Branding Fire

Conducted by TEX BROWN

YES, suh, folks, this old world's sure full o' queer characters, and figgerin' out what makes the good folks stay good, and the bad 'uns like they are, is a durned interestin' study.

And there's sure more'n one type o' ornery human, different shades and degrees. One feller will be mean by inclination, seems like, havin' a hard heart and pizen disposition, then there's a more unusual type what acts the bad man for the reason that he seems drove by a overactive imagination. A hombre who hero-worships bold, lawless men, and attempts to emulate 'em, when he actually hasn't got the stomach nor the pizen blood for the part.

Hist'ry's full o' the exploits and final hangin's o' the first class mentioned, but you don't hear a whole lot about the latter type, because such a feller is more'n apt to get scared and give up, or die a premature death o' bad judgment.

Russian Bill

I reckon Russian Bill was maybe the most celebrated character o' this latter type in the early days o' the West. Partly, he's remembered for his unusual ways, and handsome appearance, though folks don't forget him because o' the way he died, and what was later learned of his background, I figger.

This hombre called hisse'f "Russian Bill", and nobody asked him for any other monicker. One day he sort of appeared out o' space into the wild, hell-raisin' town o' Tombstone, Arizona—a mystery man, and a remarkably handsome fellow.

He had long golden hair that tumbled about his shoulders, a clean-cut, cameo-like face, and fine eyes, and carried hisse'f erect and bold. What give him away at once, though, was his brand new cowboy clothes. They had too-recently come from a mail order house to convince the citizens o' Tombstone.

Bold and Fearless

His spurs clinked loudly, though, and he wasted no time in lettin' fall hints that he was a bold, fearless feller, with a long career o' killin's and outlawry behind him. His six-shooter had four deep notches cut into its handle. He had a dark scowl to suit the occasion whenever he felt it fittin', tossed off his whiskey with a flourish, and played a good hand at poker. His faro was okay, too.

Tombstone observed him quietly, aimin' to form its own deductions.

Frank Leslie, one o' the town's lead-slingin' tough hombres, and Doc Holliday, who didn' look like a bad man, but was one o' the cold-bloodedest and most dangerous men o' the time, was heard discussin' Russian Bill.

"The gent's got pretty hair," Leslie drawled watching the Russian.

"Yep," Doc Holliday commented dryly, "but he's bad—he admits it."

It was plain to all that Russian Bill was of foreign birth, yet he spoke perfect English with hardly a trace of accent, and was said to understand several other languages.

He was sometimes heard to recite poetry when mellow in his cups, and more'n once was heard to let fall a quotation in Latin or Greek.

His manners were unmistakably distinguished, and they stood out like a sore thumb

(Continued on page 8)

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*Sources: "American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times," by Douglas Gilbert (published by Whittlesey House); I. C. S. records.

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AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 6)

in Tombstone where such effete behavior was considered scandalous.

"Pardon me," he'd say if he failed to understand somethin' that was spoke, when he should've said "Huh?" or "What did you say?"

Plumb natural, without thinkin' he'd use such expressions as "Thank you very much," or "Won't you do me the honor to have a drink with me?" In Tombstone they just said, "Name yore pizen."

Those absent minded lapses did his reputation as a bad man no good in Tombstone. They arrived at the opinion that Russian Bill was only a make-believe outlaw, and all his stories mere fantasies o' his imagination.

It didn't help his reputation any when he was observed to turn pale and silent while witnessin' a shootin' scrape in the opry house over a actress one night.

"What's the matter with you, Russian Bill?" one o' the painted ladies was heard to demand. And Bill's only explanation was to say as he walked away, "I was thinking of my mother."

No Stomach for Brawls

Soon afterwards he witnessed a free-for-all in a saloon in the little hell-raisin' town o' Charleston. In the thick o' the fracas the lights was shot out, and when they was lit again Russian Bill had quietly slipped away. It seemed plain he had no stomach for rough, low-brow brawls.

Russian Bill's nature was a queer one, full o' contradictions. He surprised everybody when he rode out one day and joined up

(Continued on page 10)

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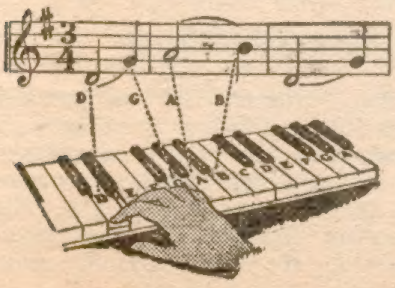

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AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 8)

with the notorious killer and outlaw o' the region, Curly Bill.

The fact that Curly Bill and his gang o' cut-throats took him in surprised folks even more.

Seems Curly Bill, with some o' his henchmen, was sittin' under a big cottonwood in front o' a saloon in Galeyville one day in summer, drinkin', and Curly Bill was amusin' hisse'f takin' practice shots at lizards, tin cans, and the like with his six-shooter, when the handsome figger o' Russian Bill rode down the street.

"Who's that?" Curly growled. And, upon bein' told he asked, "Who the devil's Russian Bill? We'd oughtta learn that tenderfoot not to wear his pretty hair down his back that-away," he said.

Russian Bill was smokin' a cigar as he rode along, holdin' it at a jaunty angle in his mouth. The next moment the cigar disappeared from his mouth and a wisp o' smoke was seen risin' from the muzzle o' Curly's six-shooter under the cottonwood tree.

Two Bills Get Together

Russian Bill didn't turn and high-tail it, as Curly Bill had expected. Instead, he looked over at Curly and laughed in easy good humor, as if admirin' the expert shootin' Curly had done.

Upshot o' the incident was the two Bills—"Curly," and "Russian," the real outlaw and the make-believe one—had many drinks together that day, for Curly liked the way the Russian had taken the loss o' his cigar.

So, the Russian become a member o' the outlaw gang and was pointed out as such by the citizens o' Galeyville, Tombstone, and surroundin' country.

Shortly after the Russian joined up, though, Curly Bill was shot in the jaw in Galeyville by one Jim Wallace, and Russian Bill nursed him back to health.

That made Curly fonder of him than ever, seemed like, but Curly wasn't workin' very hard at his job o' outlawin' just then on account o' his injury.

An Amateurish Crime

Without a doubt Russian Bill was pleased somethin' powerful at being a recognized outlaw at last, but he wasn't altogether happy. He'd had no opportunity to prove what a bold, bad man he really was. His career as an outlaw demanded that his reputation be upheld. He must commit some

(Continued on page 107)

WHO WAS GUILTY?

Can you solve this crime?

Here are the clues

The body of William Manson, a well known and prosperous young man, was found behind a clump of bushes just outside his home in the early morning hours by Patrolman Harris. Near by was the neck of a heavy quart bottle, with other glass fragments scattered about. A blow from this weapon had crushed the victim's skull. Investigation developed that Manson had been in possession of a large roll of bills the afternoon and evening of his murder and that at least six people had seen him handle the money; a lady friend, a waiter, a florist, and three bowling companions. Examination of the broken bottle neck disclosed well defined finger prints. Finger prints obtained from all the probable suspects, when compared with those on the bottle, soon solved the mystery.

A clue leads to the finger prints and the finger prints to the slayer

...now...here are the FINGER PRINTS

1 2 3 4

5

6

7

Who was guilty?

1. Lady Friend 2. The Waiter
3. The Florist . 4. Bowler #1
5. Bowler #2 6. Bowler #3
7. The Slayer

When the murderer, in his greed, carelessly dropped the bottle he branded himself. The Police Department Finger Print Experts immediately secured prints from the several people who had occasion to know Manson was carrying a large sum of money. Comparison with the freshly made prints found on the smooth glass bottle neck brought the killer to justice in short order. Study the prints and see if you can put your finger on the criminal.

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5	6		

Who Was Guilty? Put cross in square above

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Says Aged Lama

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Clay drew Kate into his arms and held her tightly

Partners of Disaster

By JOHN PAUL JONES

When grim obstacles come between Katherine Burke and the man she loves, she faces a difficult emotional problem and makes her decision like a true daughter of the West!

CHAPTER I

Construction Camp

THE lanky, red-shirted driver squirted a brown stream of tobacco juice overside and yelled, *"Whoa-a-a!"* He reared back on the reins, kicked the brake violently forward. The stagecoach skidded to a dust-enshrouded stop before a drab waystation in the lonely hills with a jerk. The force of the stop catapulted the lone passenger from her seat to her knees. Her black Stetson was jolted off and her yellow-gold hair came pouring forth in a shimmering cascade about her slim shoulders.

"He must have made that stop by throwing a log under the wheel," Katherine Burke raged angrily.

Her change purse had leaped from a pocket of her gray, mannish shirt, spewing silver upon the floor. She was gathering the money

and thrusting it deep in a pocket of her corduroy breeches when the driver flung open the door and beamed happily at her.

"Right on the dot, ma'am! Four o'clock to the second."

"Was it a dot?" Katherine said sweetly, her violet-blue eyes smouldering. "I thought you'd hit a stone wall!"

His watery eyes looked at her reproachfully.

"W-why, ma'am, how you talk."

His deep concern melted her anger. She smiled, white, even teeth sparkling between firm, red lips.

"Don't pay any attention to me. After three days of bad food, little sleep, and stagecoach jostling, I'm peevish as a tooth-cutting infant."

He grinned, mollified.

"I always end up with a flourish, ma'am," he said modestly. Then, squinting toward the empty hitch-rack in front of the weathered, two-story building, he added with a frown, "Reckon somethin' has delayed yore uncle. I'll put yore baggage down."

He retreated to the rear of the coach.

Katherine leaped nimbly to the ground, spanned slim white fingers against her shapely, trousered hips, and puckered her eyes at the sad way-station. The place looked as though it might have been marooned there among the wooded hills by the receding waters of Noah's flood. Its porch roof sagged on pillars drunkenly askew. Cracked window-panes caught the white glare of the sun. A wisp of blue smoke crawled dispiritedly from the black throat of the wobbly stone chimney. It seemed to be deserted, somberly brooding among the silent hills.

A FAINTLY apprehensive fear clouded Katherine's puckered eyes as she searched the narrow, dusty trail that squirmed a zigzag course across rolling land to the crest of a low, green-wooded hill.

The driver set her small, brass-bound trunk, and carpetbag beside her.

"Sure yuh ain't wrong about the day, ma'am?"

She shook her head without turning her gaze.

"He wrote he would meet me the sixth of June," she said. "He said he would bring a saddle horse for me to ride to camp. That's why I wore these clothes."

The driver unhitched his team, led it wearily toward the corral beyond the drab way-station. Katherine kept her eyes anxiously upon the trail. Vague fears crowded in upon her. She tried to fight down the doubt that had assailed her upon first reading her Uncle Aaron's letter. Her mistrust and suspicion were unfounded, she had kept telling herself. Yet, her mother's words, spoken long ago, stirred phantom dreads in her mind.

"My step-brother," Katherine's mother had said, "never offered help to anyone unless it served his own unscrupulous ends."

Suddenly, her heart leaped, she drew a swift breath, her slim hands pressing tighter against her hips. She bent her lithe, young body tautly forward. An excited expectancy glowed in her violet eyes. The black Stetson was a-tilt upon her shapely head. The lowering sun flickered in her silken hair, stirring a misty, golden nimbus about her hushed, eager face.

Her gaze held tensely upon the buckboard, drawn by a team of white horses, that had topped the hill's crest. Now, in a swirl of dust, those horses were charging down the trail.

Then, a qualm of misgiving possessed her. Her uncle was not in the buckboard. The driver was a young man. He reined in a dozen feet from where she stood. He vaulted lithely over a wheel and strode swiftly toward her. Under a battered gray hat shadowing clear-cut, bronzed features, cool, gray eyes appraised her swiftly. He halted before her, took off the battered hat and brushed strong, brown fingers through unruly, blond hair.

"Name's Clay Vallory, ma'am," he said in a warm, baritone voice. "Aaron's partner."

"And I am Katherine Burke," she said with a smile, extending a slim hand.

Somehow, she felt that, despite his warm voice and his friendly smile, he resented her. He gave her a vague, but definite feeling that he considered this meeting an unpleasant duty. He tossed the small trunk across a broad shoulder, picked up the carpetbag.

"It's a four-hour ride to camp, ma'am," he said.

She followed him to the buckboard, puzzled by her feeling toward him. She climbed into the seat while he stowed the baggage in the rear. She was accustomed to having young men act either too bashful or too brash toward her. This tall, gray-eyed man was neither. He seemed aloof, impersonal but polite.

He climbed in beside her, gave her a quick, sidewise glance. Then he picked up the reins,

"You mean you've never been kissed?" he asked Kate, bending toward her, his eyes alight with interest as he scanned her flushed, pretty face

flourished them, and the team leaped away. Katherine stretched out slim, trousered legs, put her black hat in her lap, and arranged fluttering strands of hair with quick, deft fingers. She studied him covertly from under long, dark lashes.

He sat with broad shoulders hunched forward, battered gray hat a-tilt on his blond head, reins dangling loosely between strong, brown fingers.

"Your dad was a railroader, wasn't he, ma'am?" he asked without taking his eyes from the winding trail.

"Yes, until Mother died, five years ago. Then he decided a farm would be a better place than a grade camp to raise his motherless children. My brother and sister, Bobbie and Aileen, were only three years old. Twins. Dad sold the outfit and bought a farm in Kansas. Shortly afterward, a horse fell on him. Made him an invalid."

"Aaron told me," he said, his voice warm with sympathy. "He told me that drouth, grasshoppers, and finally the bank took the farm. And you kept the family together by teachin' school. I reckon your uncle's offer of a job out here meant a lot to you."

"Nothing has ever meant more!" she replied. "I shall never be able to repay my gratitude."

HE KEPT his brooding eyes upon the trail. Watching him, a sudden explanation occurred to her. He resented her uncle giving her the job of keeping the books and commissary.

They topped the hill, and the trail sloped downward under a green canopy of outspreading branches. Sunlight, sifting through the shuttering leaves, dappled the trail with shadows. A forest choir sang sweetly, undisturbed by the far off cawing of spiraling crows. Steel-shod hoofs clanged sharp and vibrant against out-cropping rocks. The buckboard rose and fell in swaying jolts, intermittently pressing Katherine's slim body against the big man beside her. She could smell the faint odor of tobacco smoke clinging to his gray shirt from a pocket of which a Bull Durham tag swung to and fro.

He faced her suddenly, resolution in his gray eyes.

"Ma'am," he said gently. "I ain't the man for a chore like this. I haven't had much experience with girls. I've been tryin' to figure an easy way to tell you. But there ain't any."

Katherine jerked sidewise in the seat. Panic swirled in a cold, smothery chill in her breast. She clenched her hands.

"Has it something to do with my job?" she cried hoarsely.

He shook his head. She read the compassion in his eyes. Saw the firm lines of his face soften.

"Three days ago we had some holes to blast," he said slowly. "Aaron cut the fuse too short."

"O-o-oh!" Her breath sobbed in a long, shocked moan. She stared at him white-faced.

"U-uncle Aaron—dead?" she whispered.

He nodded. "He lived four hours. Long enough to leave you his half in this railroad construction company. But there's a seven-thousand-dollar mortgage due on it the fifth of next month. And no chance of payin' it off."

"But he wrote me that the job was mine as long as I wanted it," she cried desperately. "That he had another contract on the Santa Fe when he finished here!"

"Yes," said Clay grimly. "I was in New Mexico getting that contract when Aaron mortgaged the outfit. He had been drinkin', gamblin' . . . but that's over," he said with a shrug. "As his partner, the mortgage is good against me."

She was staring at him shocked.

"But why did he offer me the job when he knew? Oh, that was cruel!" she cried. "I don't matter, but there are father, Bobbie, and Aileen. I had to give our small house as security for a loan to make this trip."

"He brought you out here because he figured you could get an extension on the mortgage." There was a grim, harsh note in his voice. "When he attended your mother's funeral five years ago, he thought you were a pretty girl and would grow into a beautiful woman. A beautiful woman is about the only thing that would influence the man who holds the mortgage to renew it."

"I'm glad he was only Mother's step-brother," she said bitterly. Then, her lips quivering, she looked at him with loathing creeping slowly into her eyes. "And you—knew this? You want me to try to—"

"No!" he said with sudden, harsh fury. "I knew nothing about Aaron writing you until he told me before he died."

"There'll be nothing left after the foreclosure?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am," he said regretfully.

CHAPTER II

Marquita

KATHERINE slumped dejectedly in the seat. An aching pain came into her heart as she thought of what this would mean to her father. Aaron's letter had brought a glow of eager hope into his faded, discouraged eyes.

"Kit, this'll mean money for an operation," he had said. Emotion had shaken his voice. A sublime eagerness had shone in his pain-wracked face. "It'll put me back on my feet so I can take care of my kids like a father should."

And now his hopes would be wrecked!

Glistening tears stung her eyes, rolled slowly down her cheeks. Clay's voice came low, and gentle.

"Ma'am, after you've checked the books and have seen just how things stand, I want to make you a proposition about your half interest."

She straightened suddenly, doubt and distrust flaring her eyes. Had he misrepresented the situation to take advantage of her? She searched his calm, bronzed face intently. She didn't want to believe that.

"What kind of a proposition?" she said.

"I'll give you five hundred dollars cash, and six thousand dollars to be paid out of future contracts. You to get half of all profits until you are paid in full."

Doubt changed to certainty. He was trying to cheat her—or perhaps only get rid of her as a partner. Her lips tightened.

"I thought you said there was no chance of saving the outfit?"

His eyes turned back to the trail.

"I'm gamblin', ma'am. If I win, I own an outfit. If I lose, it's worth a five-hundred-dollar gamble."

"And you have no idea now how you can pay it off?"

"None, ma'am. But I'll gamble."

She studied his calm, bronzed profile for a long time. Tears began to mist her eyes and she felt a hard, tight lump in her throat.

"My coming was not your fault, Clay," she said softly, using his name unconsciously. "I couldn't take your money." Her lips trembled. "B-but thank you."

He looked at her quickly, a guilty flush in his face.

"Why, ma'am," he protested, "I ain't offerin' to give you money. I'm offerin' to buy your interest."

A smile twitched her lips. Her eyes were soft and warm.

"In a bankrupt outfit?"

He looked at her gravely.

"Have you got fare back home? A stake to carry you a while?"

Panic widened her eyes. She hadn't thought the situation that bad. She shook her head, said in a tight voice, "No."

Silence ran between them. They had come from under the trees and faced another upgrade. Above the green-domed hills, frothy mounds of creamy clouds floated upon a cobalt sea, gold-tinged by the lowering sun. They topped the rise, went down again under sheltering trees.

At the bottom, the team splashed across a shallow, gurgling creek. Their flying hoofs threw beads of glistening water. Birds flitted among the willows lining the clear, cool water. Dragonflies darted to and fro like tiny arrows. Hidden flowers and shrubs scented the moist air.

"What kind of a man owns the mortgage, Clay?" Katherine asked, looking at the big man from brooding eyes.

"Power mad," Clay said grimly. "Aims to be a big man. He owns tent saloons and gamblin' halls along the grade. He's investin' in mines, ranchland, an' townsites."

"Clay!" she cried breathlessly, "if we offered him a bonus, would he reconsider?"

"No," he said sharply. "You wouldn't accept the kind of terms he'd offer you. His only weakness is pretty women. Strang is full of larceny, lust, and greed."

"Strang! Phil Strang?"

He looked at her in astonishment.

"You know him?"

She laughed mirthlessly.

"Dad gave him a thrashing and ran him out of our camp ten years ago for crooked gambling. I was only twelve then, but I've never forgotten it. And I'll bet Strang hasn't."

"He's a vindictive man," Clay said. "He figures he has a score to settle with me. I lost my temper when I learned he had deliberately led Aaron into drinkin' and gamblin' so he could get hold of the outfit. I reckon I was in the wrong. Aaron was old enough to know what he was doing."

"You had a fight with him?"

Clay grinned. "I whipped red blazes out of him."

Katherine was well acquainted with Clay Vallory before the journey was finished. It was sundown before they came within sight of their destination.

The sun splashed its brilliant colors on the canvas of the sky when they reached the last twist in the trail. Blue, and gold, and vermillion tinted the vast, silken coverlet drawn over a slumbering day. Dusk was a fragile veil of purple enwrapping the green, wooded hills. The cool, flower-scented breath of evening whispered caressingly among sighing leaves; and tiny creatures of the night were astir in the shadowed world.

"Camp is just over the hill," said Clay as the weary, sweat-stained team pricked their ears and quickened their pace.

Katherine's tiredness dropped away from her. She sat leaning forward, eyes glowing with eager expectancy. The team topped the rise, broke into a gallop on the downgrade. An aching nostalgia filled Katherine with a sad, sweet yearning as she looked down upon the camp under tall, shadowing trees. Lighted tents glowed like mounds of pale amber through the purple dusk.

"Clay!" she whispered in a hushed voice. "It's like coming home after wandering a long, long time in a foreign, unfriendly land."

OLD, familiar sounds, drifted out to her —hearty laughter, shouts, loud-voiced banter. And someone was playing "Home, Sweet Home" on a harmonica. She brushed a hand across her eyes where starlight sparkled on a tear.

A long-eared hound came loping up the grade and began leaping in and out at the heels of the horses, barking and yipping a welcome. The team broke into a gallop, swerved toward a water-trough at the gate of a large pole corral in which milled a hundred mules.

At the water-trough, the team halted. Clay leaped down, assisting Katherine. A lantern came bobbing toward them through the dusk. Clay turned back to the horses, releasing their check-reins.

Katherine hadn't noticed the girl who had been standing in the shadow of a tree. Now, the girl came forward.

"'Allo, Clay!" she shouted. She ignored Katherine, hurrying toward Clay. His voice stopped her.

"Marquita, this is Miss Burke."

The girl stopped short in front of Katherine. She was tall. Her lips were red and full against the darkness of her face. Hair, sleek and ebon as a raven's wing, was combed back in a pompadour.

"'Ow you was?" she said, faint hostility in her tone. "I'm 'appy to meet you, Mees Burke."

"How do you do?" Katherine said smiling and wondering who the girl was.

Marquita moved, lithe as a cat, toward Clay, her riding skirt swishing about her long legs. Katherine felt a vague sense of resentment toward the tall, dark girl as she watched her halt before Clay and put slim, dark hands against his chest. She whispered something Katherine could not hear.

The man with the lantern had come close now.

"Miss Burke, this is Misery Peters, corral boss," Clay said.

"Howdy, ma'am," said the small, wizened man holding the lantern aloft so its yellow rays etched Katherine's slim figure sharply against the dark. "I got yore room fixed up in the commissary—and a tub of water."

"You're a darling!" Katherine cried.

Clay interrupted his low-voiced conversation with Marquita.

"I'll bring Miss Burke's baggage, Misery," he said.

With a quick, over-the-shoulder glance at the two shadowy figures beside the horses, Katherine followed Misery toward the wide camp street.

Little groups of red-shirted men sat before the tents talking, laughing, shouting at times to a more distant companion. Short-stemmed pipes glowed redly, their sharp, pungent fumes hazing the air. The men fell silent as Katherine passed. Through open tent flaps, she could see double-deck bunks and flickering lamps fixed to centerpoles.

The wide street ended at the front of the commissary. This was the only building of lumber. Long, low-roofed, tar-papered. Fifty yards behind it, Katherine could see the canvas-walled mess-hall and cookhouse. "Misery" Peters unlocked the door, and a gust of hot, stuffy air flowed out, laden with odors of soap, tobacco, tar, and the woolly smell of new shirts that came from merchandise stacked upon shelves lining both sides of the room and upon the long table in the center of the floor.

Misery lit a lamp hanging from the rafters above the rough-plank counter and then trudged toward a doorway in a partition at the end of the room. The lantern cast gro-

tesque, flickering shadows against the walls of the room which he showed her. Inside the doorway, he lighted a wall-bracket lamp and faced Katherine.

"This was Aaron's," he said. "I cleaned everything for you. New sheets, blankets, pillows—you'll find everything in good shape."

"It's fine," cried Katherine, her eyes flitting about the pine-walled room. "And that tub of water! I feel like my clothes are stuck to me with sweat and dust."

"Clay'll be along with yore baggage," Misery said. "I'll have Sing Lee fix yore supper."

"Who is Marquita?" Katherine said, trying to make her voice sound casual.

MISERY scowled. "She deals faro in one of Strang's gamblin' tents," he replied, dislike in his tone. "I don't know whether she's tryin' to rope Clay into something, or whether she's sweet on him." He started back toward the front, then paused. "Take yore time gettin' freshed-up."

Katherine tossed her hat upon the cot, sat down beside it, her eyes drifting slowly over the room. There were windows at both ends. A yellow slicker hung from a spike above the cot. On the opposite wall, a box had been nailed up to serve as a shelf. Below it was a rough-plank table upon which were blueprints, account books, and scattered papers.

She rose wearily, closed and latched her door. Then pulling the window-shades, she stripped off her clothes and climbed into the tub. The cool, soothing water eased the tired ache of her muscles. But she was irritated at herself by being disturbed about what Misery had said. Was Marquita "sweet" on Clay? Was Clay interested in Marquita?

"Jealous!" she accused herself. She was a little startled to realize that she was.

She was giving herself a brisk rubdown when the front door opened and quick footsteps came toward her door. They halted there.

"I'll set your stuff out here, ma'am," Clay said. "They're scrubbin' the mess-hall, so I'll bring your supper over. How soon'll you be ready?"

"Ten minutes," she answered.

After he had gone, Katherine dragged in her trunk and got from it a checkered gingham dress which she donned. She plaited her hair and coiled it in two golden ropes about her head.

She was standing in the open doorway of her room when Clay returned with a tray of food. Soft, yellow lamplight stirred a misty, golden halo about her face. She knew a quick, pleasant thrill when Clay stopped short.

"You're pretty as—"

He broke off abruptly. A faint tinge of color deepened his bronzed cheeks.

"I brought your supper," he explained hastily.

He had brought enough for both. Beef, potatoes, bread, a steaming pot of fragrant coffee, and apple pie.

"Misery had the commissary open this evenin'," he said. "So you can go to bed any time you're ready."

"Clay," she said. She looked wistfully about the large room that reminded her of her father's commissary. "Isn't there any way that we could save the outfit?"

He sighed wearily.

"I ain't been able to figure it, ma'am. If we had a month longer before the mortgage was due, we maybe could move onto that contract I took with the Sante Fe. I'll gamble we could find someone down there who would take over the mortgage for a bonus. But we won't have time. This job will take twenty of the twenty-nine days left before the mortgage is due. Nine days is too short. Strang knows that."

"I'm going to talk with Strang anyway," she said grimly. "There's nothing to lose by it."

"And nothing to gain from a hombre like him," Clay said harshly.

CHAPTER III

Phil Strang's Offer

SILENTLY they finished eating. Afterward, Katherine sat down upon an empty packing case, hands folded in her lap. Clay sat down facing her, long legs stretched out. Flickering lamplight brought into clear relief the outlines of his clear-cut, bronzed features.

"Oh, I just can't go back and face Dad and the kids!" she cried. "They've banked so heavily on me here."

He was observing her with a queer, troubled expression. Their eyes met, and he shifted his quickly to a remote part of the

shadowy room. Then, she saw his jaws harden as he looked back at her with sudden resolution.

"Ma'am." He paused. She had an impression that he was arranging chaotic thoughts into coherent sequence.

"Yes?" Her eye-corners puckered. She was puzzled by his sudden uneasiness.

"Ma'am, let's say a man was in love with you. But you ain't in love with him. And then, you and this man are close together sometime. And, he kisses you. He can't help it. He's just sort've—well—"

He broke off with a helpless gesture of a strong brown hand.

Marquita! Katherine felt a swift, sharp little pang in her heart.

"You mean what I would do?" she said gravely.

"Well, that. And how you would feel toward him—afterward."

She frowned at her feet, not wanting him to see the hurt in her eyes. She didn't want to think about him kissing Marquita. She felt warm color wash into her cheeks as she lifted her face and met his eyes.

"I—I don't know," she said unsteadily. "It has never happened to me."

He seemed startled.

"You mean, you've never been kissed? Never wanted to be?"

She caught a swift breath, felt the blood quicken in a mad race through her veins. Her long, dark lashes lowered and she felt warm, bright color glow in her face. She closed her lips against the "No" that was upon them, and with a shy boldness, looked into his eyes and nodded.

"I've wanted to be." She tried to hide her sudden confusion behind a gay laugh. "But the man didn't offer to kiss me."

He looked at her a little incredulously for a long moment before rising with slow deliberation. She could see a warm glow in his eyes and felt her pulses pound. He stood tall and straight before her, and she could see the quicker rise and fall of his chest. A queer, smothery sensation fluttered about her heart. She was looking up at him, with parted lips.

"That man was blind!" he said with slow, deliberate emphasis.

Vibrant thrills chased along her nerves. The blood pounded in her throat. She struggled to subdue the wild storm a-swirl within her. She saw a quick, eager hunger in his eyes. Knew that her own were betraying her desperate yearning to have his strong arms about her, holding her close.

"Ma'am, he must have been blind."

"Don't call me ma'am," she said. "My name is Katherine—Kit."

He took a half-step toward her. She looked up at him, her eyes aglow.

"Kit!"

"Clay!" she whispered.

A step at the doorway tore asunder the fragile fabric of the enchantment. Misery Peters entered, sharp, birdlike eyes blinking inquisitively from one to the other.

"Bill Muldoon wants to see you right away," he said to Clay. "And, afore yuh go, let's empty that tub of water."

Misery trudged down the room toward the rear. Clay stepped close beside Katherine. She lifted her face, her eyes glowing.

"Someday I'll get you alone an' claim that kiss," he whispered.

"That is a promise," she said with a little catch in her voice.

LONG after they had gone, Katherine stood in the open doorway, staring wistfully off through the dark. Few of the tents were lighted now. Tired men had sought their beds.

She locked the door, turned off the lights, and went to her own room. She undressed slowly, thoughtfully.

"Ma'am," she whispered gently. "If you're not in love, you're so close a kiss would make the difference." . . .

It was long after the men had left for the grade that Katherine woke next morning. She ate breakfast, served by a tubby little Chinaman in a white apron and bright yellow shirt who had beamed and announced happily: "Me Sing Lee."

She made her way to the corral and found Misery treating a crippled mule. The air about him was pungent with carbolic.

"How about a horse, Misery? I'd like to have a look at the job."

"Shore, ma'am." Then he squinted at her with worried eyes. "Is what Clay says about losin' the outfit right?"

"I'm afraid so, Misery," she said tightly. "Were you with Uncle Aaron and Clay long?"

He shook his head.

"Been with this gradin' outfit about eight months. It's my first and last of this kind. Me and some of the boys has filed on ranchland down in New Mexico. We're hittin' for there soon as this job is done. Got us sort've

a stock company. We aim to pool our savin's and work and raise beef. I'll saddle a hoss, ma'am."

A roadway had been beaten into the earth by the constant pound of the teams going to and from the grade. Katherine put her horse into a canter down this roadway.

The smooth brown surface of the completed grade needed only ballast, ties, and rails before trains would begin to rumble through these low, wooded hills. Engine whistles would moan their eerie echoes where once was heard only the cries of coyotes or the bellowing of now departed buffaloes.

Strands of golden hair fluttered about Katherine's flushed, glowing face. This was an old, yet ever new scene to her. She had known it from childhood. The travel from job to job with her father's outfit had always thrilled her. Graders moved like a Gypsy caravan.

She frowned against the sunlight as she spied another rider cantering down the grade toward her. Then, she felt her heart begin to beat in swift consternation. She had not wanted to meet Phil Strang so soon but she was certain the man riding toward her was he.

She continued watching him from uneasy eyes as they drew closer. She searched her mind for some approach about a renewal of the mortgage. Yet, she felt certain he would not grant it if he knew her identity. It had been ten years since she had seen her father run Phil Strang out of camp, but the tall, dark man had changed little in the passing years.

He rode erect on a frisky, dappled mare. A soft gray hat was a-tilt above his copper-hued features. The trouser-bottoms of his black mohair suit were pulled over the tops of shining boots. A black string-tie fluttered from the collar of his white shirt.

Katherine did not miss the swift, startled expression in his dark eyes as he reined in facing her. He tipped his hat, teeth flashing in a smile.

"You must be Aaron's niece," he said in a pleasant voice. "Please accept my sympathy for the terrible tragedy. I am Phil Strang."

She bowed slightly, her eyes searching his coppery-hued face intently. If he knew her as Terry Burke's daughter, his expression did not betray it.

"I had intended calling upon you soon, Mr. Strang. About the mortgage. We will pay you a generous bonus for a month's extension."

SHE flinched inwardly as his eyes traveled slowly over her lithe, trousered figure. He met her eyes, and an expression of distress came upon his face. He shook his head.

"I am afraid it is impossible, Miss Burke."

She felt a cold little shiver. He knew her name. His dark eyes seemed to be mocking her now. He knew she was Terry Burke's daughter. He folded his hand on his saddle-horn, leaned toward her.

"But I'll make you a proposition, Miss Burke," he said quietly.

She felt a surge of anger rise up within her. Her eyes flashed, but she restrained the scathing retort on her lips. She could see the tiny, malicious flame in his dark eyes.

"You will experience great pleasure from foreclosing on the daughter of Terry Burke, won't you, Mr. Strang?"

She saw a momentary tinge of color tint his dark cheeks, then he shrugged.

"I bear no grudge, Miss Burke. At the time I lent the money, I had no idea Aaron Fergus

[*Turn page*]

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

was the uncle of Terry Burke's daughter. He told me the day before his death that you were coming out to take charge of his books. Besides, I do not allow my personal feelings to govern a business deal."

She disliked, and distrusted him but she thought of a pain-wracked man in a wheel chair back in Kansas. She dreaded the effect upon him of learning Aaron's motive in giving her the job. If she could only save the outfit! Would any price be too great to pay?

"And your proposition?" she said coldly.

She shivered under the intent stare of his dark eyes.

"Aaron explained your situation, and how badly you need money. This outfit moved to the Sante Fe, and under competent management, could clear as much as fifteen thousand dollars on a contract. What would half of that amount mean to you?"

She stared at him, trying to read what lay behind those dark, crafty eyes. Her mind pictured with fluttering heart what that sum would mean. Medical attention for her father. A decent chance for Bobbie and Aileen. A chance for her own happiness with Clay.

"You know what it would mean," she said in an agitated voice. "Are you trying to be cruel?"

"I am trying to make you a proposition," he said coldly. "Your uncle told me you knew as much about grade-building as he. After I have foreclosed, I will re-assign you a half interest if you will take charge of the outfit."

She caught her breath, staring at him. She could not believe him sincere. Was this offer some furtherance to a petty scheme of vengeance against her father for a ten-year-old grudge?

"Why do you make this offer to me rather than to Mr. Vallory?"

A faint smile tweaked his thin lips. His dark eyes twinkled maliciously.

"Because I expect to learn railroading," he said, his glance once more drifting over her. "As my tutor, you would make the task a pleasure. We will not require the services of Clay Vallory."

She knew her own self-respect demanded that she tell him what she thought of him and his insulting proposal but she fought down the anger raging within her. She looked at him with a withering contempt blazing in her violet eyes.

"Good day, Mr. Strang," she said coldly, and urged her horse forward in a lope.

She heard his voice call after her. "Better think it over."

CHAPTER IV

Magic of Love

EVEN as she rode wildly ahead telling herself she would never consider such a proposal, she knew that in the days to come she would be tortured in making a choice between two alternatives. Half of fifteen thousand dollars would mean salvation to her dear ones.

Far ahead, now, she could see the graders at work. A circling parade of mule-teams moved in an endless chain. Earth-scoured plows and scrapers gleamed with silver sheen in the bright sun. The fresh-turned grade scented the air with a moist, earthy smell.

Red-shirted, sweating men paused with their picks and shovels as she rode by. They grinned, nodded, and called, "Howdy ma'am!" She smiled back at them, flung up a slim hand in greeting.

She could smell the strong odor of their short-stemmed pipes. Hear men among them whistling, singing a chantey of the grade. Or now and then, the stinging lash of a mule-skinner's voice scourging a recalcitrant mule. These were rough men, hard men who were building with their brawn an empire from the dreams of other men. To Katherine, graders would always be her "folks."

Clay, staggering along behind a plough whose deep earth-bite kept jerking him to and fro, saw her and shouted. A grinning, redheaded Irishman took his place at the plow, and Clay came striding toward her in long-legged leaps over furrowed earth. Dirt and sweat were caked upon his face and bare, muscular arms. His shirt was wet across his chest and broad shoulders.

"Have a good sleep?" he asked.

"Made up for all I lost," she said, and meeting his eyes felt a quick flutter of her pulses, and the rush of color to her cheeks.

"Kit!" he said in an eager, excited voice. "I think we can whip this thing."

She leaned toward him from the saddle, her eyes tense. Her heart began to hammer.

"How, Clay?" she cried in a hushed voice. "How?"

"Big Bill Muldoon gave me the idea. Him

Misery Peters, and some more fellers have filed on ranchland down in New Mexico. They want to get started on it as soon as they can. I've figured all along that we can finish here in twenty days. That figure was based on a ten-hour-day, and excludin' the two Sundays between now and the fifth of July. That means actually eighteen workin' days of ten hours each. One hundred eighty hours. If we worked fourteen hours a day, includin' Sunday, we could finish up in thirteen days. In fact, we wouldn't need the teams for the last two days."

Katherine was trembling with excitement. Her face was flushed, her eyes glowing.

"You mean we could move the outfit toward the Sante Fe within eleven days?"

"No, just the mules. They're worth more than the mortgage if we get them down on the Sante Fe grade. I'm hopin' we can borrow enough on them to pay Strang. But even if we're forced to sell them, we'll have something left."

Katherine looked anxiously toward the laboring men. Between the lifting of their picks, or the dip of their shovels, they were casting curious glances toward her. She looked back at Clay.

"Will the men work those hours?"

"I'll know tonight," he said. "You get back to camp and figure just what we are going to owe if we finish in thirteen days. There'll be a saving on food, and other things. Then, we'll offer the men eighteen days pay for workin' those thirteen days. It'll break us, but spreadin' wages over eighteen days wouldn't give us anything either."

"I'll get back to camp and have the figures ready tonight," she said eagerly. "Good-by, Clay."

"Kit!"

She had whirled her horse. Now she half turned in the saddle to look at him with quirked brows. He stepped close, looked up at her.

"I love you," he said.

THEN he turned and strode swiftly back toward the working gangs. A wild, exhilarating thrill coursed along her nerves. She urged her horse into a canter. Wind whipped her golden hair about her flushed face. Her eyes were starry.

"Ma'am," she whispered with a joyous little laugh, "I wonder if there's a moon tonight?"

The exhilaration of Clay's avowal remained with her for the rest of the day and she was still thinking about it, that evening, when she stood in the commissary doorway watching the tired graders trudge wearily into camp through the gathering dusk. Ahead of them, plodding hooves stirring a dusty mist, tied-up trace chains jingling like sleigh bells, came the mule teams.

Sweat-stained, dirt-grimed graders lifted their hands in salute and smiled tiredly as they passed the commissary. The yellow mounds of tent lights began to bloom along the street.

Clay came slowly toward her, and Katherine noted the weary lines in his dirt-and-sweat-grimed face. His shirt was white with dried sweat.

"There's a creek about three hundred yards below the cookhouse," he said. "I'm goin' down an' muddy it before supper." Then suddenly he brightened, his eyes glowed. "Kit, the boys have agreed on the plan."

"Oh, Clay!" she cried breathlessly. "We're going to pull through. I've gone through the books. The days we save will mean a few hundred dollars cash to us."

"We can sure use it. Now, I'm goin' to take that bath, and, after supper, you and I'll go strollin'."

"Clay, is there a moon tonight?"

He looked at her quickly. Then a gentle smile played about his firm lips. His eyes twinkled.

"There'll be stars, anyway. They're mighty pretty glimmerin' through the pines."

"But I am afraid to be among the pines at night alone." Her voice was bantering, but it had a curious little catch in it, and warm color spread across her cheeks.

"You won't be," he said softly.

"And that"—she bent over, whispering—"is another promise!"

When the supper call was clanged out on the steel triangle, the graders stampeded in a wild rush for the cookhouse, shouting boisterously as they crowded along the benches at the tables. Then, seeing Katherine seated at the head of a table beside Clay, they grew suddenly quiet.

"Go to it, boys," she called out with a smile. "I was born and raised in a grade camp. Make me feel at home."

It wasn't long before they were including her in their good-natured jibes and laughter. Knives and forks rattled against tinware dishes. The aroma of coffee, roast beef, and fresh-baked pies scented the air.

When supper was over, Clay left the cookhouse first and, going out a few minutes later, she found him waiting for her at the doorstep.

"Clay, nothing can interfere now, can it?" Katherine asked him anxiously as she and Clay strolled up the hillside. Warm, purpling shadows under the tall pines already had wrapped them in a fragrant cloak.

His hand pressed hers reassuringly.

"Nothing I can see, Kit. We'll have sixteen days to get the mules to th' Sante Fe. If we can't get someone to take up the mortgage on the strength of the mules, we may have to sell them. But we'll have something left."

"We've got to!" she whispered tensely.

She was thinking: I couldn't burden Clay with my responsibilities if we lose the outfit. It wouldn't be fair.

On a cushion of grass beside a fallen tree, they sat down close together in the warm, pine-scented air. The sounds from camp were far away; but near in the darkness, was the silver lute of a cricket. High in a gently stirring pine, a bird cheeped faintly in its dreams.

"Clay, do you think me a shameless hussy? We met only yesterday."

He drew her into his strong arms, held her tight against him. The starshine played in her hair, speckling her uplifted face with little golden glints.

"Kit!" She could feel the wild pound of his heart against her. "Kit, darling, I love you."

A SOFT wind whispered a paean in the mystic hush of the night, its breath a sweet scented caress among shadows fragile as a dream.

"Clay," her voice was a tremulous whisper, and her arms stole about his neck. "Clay, don't ever stop!"

His lips were warm and demanding against hers. A wild maelstrom of flaming rapture surged through her, sweeping away past and future. There was only the timeless now.

It was not until the moon had come out to join the stars that they returned to camp. A great silver-gleaming disc low above the wooded hills. Katherine hugged Clay's arm tight, looked up at him with a mischievous little laugh as they walked homeward.

"I was jealous last night, darling."

"Marquita," he said, and laughed softly. "She was asking me to run away with her."

"Run away with her?" Katherine looked at him from startled eyes.

He chuckled.

"Don't take Marquita seriously. She's probably asking someone else tonight."

A thought chilled her. "Clay, could Strang prevent our taking the mules?"

"He might," Clay admitted a little grimly. "He has a mortgage on them. But I aim to leave here at night and drive them hard. We'll be over a county line before he knows about it."

She had not mentioned her meeting with Strang. She feared Clay might do what she would like to have done. She did not want to cause a fight that might hinder their plan. It would be satisfaction enough to frustrate Strang. Saving the outfit was all that mattered now.

"What if the men talk, and he learns our plan?" she asked anxiously.

"I didn't tell them our plan. Only a few of them know about the mortgage. They figure we're anxious to get the job done quick. The fellers who're goin' into ranchin' want to get started on it. The others have saved up a stake and are anxious for a roll in the sawdust. Of course, Strang might guess what we're up to. That's a chance we got to take."

"We've got to succeed!" she cried tensely. "We've got to!"

He kissed her good night at the commissary door, and she went to bed, to toss in troubled dreams. A tall, dark man sat on the top pole of a high corral in which a hundred mules milled. Malice, greed, and sarcasm twisted his coppery-hued face as he laughed mockingly while she tried desperately, and failed, to open the gate. She slept restlessly through the rest of the night.

A week dragged by. Seven days of taut, suspense-strained nerves. Twice, Katherine had passed Phil Strang on the grade. Each time he had stopped her, chatted as though they were old friends. Not once did he mention his first talk with her. She had to repress cold little shudders as his dark, avid eyes crawled over her.

Yet, because she feared to arouse suspicion that might betray Clay's plan for paying the mortgage, she hid her feeling of aversion toward him. She tried to create the impression, by subtle word and gesture, that she found him attractive, that she only was shy and hesitant. It was not easy to maintain such an attitude toward a man whom she loathed.

The work on the grade was going even better than expected. Clay was jubilant. Three days more, and he would leave with the mules. He would take four graders with him, while Katherine, aided by Big Bill Muldoon, would supervise the pick-and-shovel gangs who were to finish the grade.

Returning from the grade this day, Katherine was startled to find Marquita seated on an empty box outside the commissary door. She felt a sudden, inexplicable fear. She was aware of the Spanish girl's dark eyes watching her approach.

Katherine dismounted, slapped her mount which trotted off toward the corral.

"Hello," she said, and thought how strikingly pretty the girl was. She wore a riding skirt, a white blouse, and red silk scarf knotted about her throat. Her olive-hued features were clear-cut as a cameo, and her long-lashed, luminous eyes were dark, expressive.

MARQUITA'S white, even teeth flashed between her parted red lips.

"Hallo," she said. "Your name it is Kitty, huh?"

"That's right," said Katherine, trying to fathom the meaning of the visit. The dark eyes were suggestive of guileful shrewdness.

Marquita bowed her dark head, frowning at the tips of her polished boots. She looked up suddenly, said: "You lofe Clay?"

The unexpectedness of the question startled Katherine. She tried to cover her surprise with a laugh.

"Why, I've only known him a week."

Marquita gestured a slim, brown hand impatiently.

"One day, one week, one year—lofe is not measure by how many day, week, year." Her luminous eyes studied Katherine intently, then she nodded. "I'm t'ink so. I will make you offer."

Katherine gave a start. Everyone seemed to be making her propositions! But the dark girl intrigued her.

"Mr. Strang made me one some days ago," she said dryly.

Marquita's dark eyes glinted. "Phil, huh? That slick man he make all pretty girls offer. He make you offer about when he take camp, huh? Mule, plow, peek, shovel—ever't'ing." She nodded sagely. "He is smart but I'm more smart. You give me Clay, I give you camp." She waved a brown hand in an all-inclusive gesture toward the camp and the grade. "Whole camp—pick, mule, plow, shovel, tent."

Katherine stared in amazement. Then a sudden thought brought an apprehensive quickening of her heart. Was this some ruse upon the part of Strang? Had he guessed something?

"You mean you will cancel the mortgage?"

Marquita nodded vigorously.

"Sure t'ing! You give me Clay, I give you everyt'ing."

CHAPTER V

Ominous Clouds

FOR a while Katherine studied Marquita intently, trying to divine what cunning lay behind those dark, expressive eyes.

"You are in love with Clay?" she asked.

Marquita's eyes widened.

"Of course! Sure t'ing! I'm lofe him like I'm nefer lofe before." She nodded emphatically. "I know this because I'm in lofe, one time, with bandido—ver' 'ansome caballero," she added with a sigh. "We get marry. He get shoot. I'm widow."

Katherine fought back the laughter that roiled up within her. Marquita appeared gravely serious.

"That was too bad," she said sympathetically.

"No, was good!" Marquita contradicted, brushing slim, brown fingers through her dark hair. "I'm right away fall in lofe with Antonio—but that was bad, very bad," she added, sighing. "His wife take him away quick!"

Katherine grinned. The girl puzzled her. She was not sure whether or not there was a clever purpose behind this surface comedy.

"So now you will cancel the mortgage if I give you Clay?" Katherine said. "But, I don't understand how I am to give you Clay or how you are to cancel a mortgage owned by Phil Strang."

"Is simple," said the dark girl nonchalantly. Her luminous eyes traveled slowly over the lithe, golden-haired girl, came to rest upon her flushed face. "You tell Clay you will not kiss heem, you will not lofe him, you will not speak to him. You tell him. Go 'way! After dat," her dark eyes lighted up and she flashed Katherine a triumphant smile, "I get him!"

Katherine could no longer restrain herself. She broke into a gale of laughter.

"Marquita!" she cried, her voice choked with mirth. "You're hoorahin' me. Phil Strang sent you here for some purpose, didn't he?"

The dark eyes flashed venomously.

"Phil he pick up with 'nother girl. He's give me what you call boot out. One month ago, he lofe me when we get marry."

"You're his wife!" exclaimed Katherine, startled.

"Sure t'ing. That is 'ow I'm give you camp for Clay."

"But you are married to Strang!" Katherine reminded her.

"Ha!" Marquita's voice was harsh. "You t'ink this Phil can throw me out like old shoe? I'm his wife. When he die, I'm his widow. Widow she get what 'usband own."

"But you aren't his widow."

"I will be," said Marquita with solemn certitude. "You t'ink Marquita is old shoe to be kick out? Ha! I kill that big liar Phil, like this!" She made a swift, plunging stab with an imaginary knife. She rose, stretched her slim, feline body. "I'm go now. You t'ink over what Marquita say. Tomorrow, Marquita come back."

Katherine watched the tall, dark girl as she strode toward a tethered horse. What had been behind this absurd interview? She could not see how it was to serve Phil Strang, but fear built tension within her.

Had Strang been playing with them like a cat with a mouse, waiting right up until the last moment to pounce and frustrate all their plans?

That night, when he came in from the grade, Katherine told Clay of Marquita's visit, mimicking the girl's dialect. Clay laughed heartily, then grew sober.

"Marquita is a hot-tempered little wildcat if she gets mad. But I wouldn't take her threats seriously. She's not very constant in her affections," he added dryly. "I doubt she is Strang's wife. You aimin' to trade me off?" He laughed softly.

"No, no, darling!" she cried, and her voice was freighted with fear. She was thinking of Strang's proposal, not Marquita's. What would be her choice if forced to make one between sacrificing Clay or the welfare of her loved ones?

"Why, honey!" He caught her to him, held her close. "You're not taking it seriously, are you?"

KATHERINE stared at him, haggard-eyed.

"Oh, Clay! I'm afraid, afraid!"

"Two more days, sweet, and I'll be on my way with the mules," he said gently. "I know we'll find someone to take over the mortgage and give us a chance to pay it off. Before I go, there'll be something else." He halted, looked down into her upturned face, his eyes were soft, warm, and yearning. "There's a preacher holdin' a revival meetin' down the grade. We'll be married."

"Clay, darling!" She put her arms about his neck, her eyes looking up into his pleadingly. "I can't marry you until we're sure. Please don't misunderstand me, dear. It isn't that you wouldn't be willing to take care of us all, but it wouldn't be fair to you—or Dad. It has tortured him enough to be forced to take things from me. What would it mean if it were you who had to shoulder the burden."

"Kitten, your family is my family," he said gently. "We are young. Even if we lose the outfit, we'll get another, some day."

"Oh, darling, it's got to be my way! I could never be happy knowing that Dad was wretched."

"It'll be your way," he said huskily, burying his face in her silken, scented hair. "We'll save the outfit."

They were standing behind the counter, the yellow light of the overhead lamp, stirring shadows from the dark corners.

Footsteps came swiftly toward the doorway.

They both stood apart, looking toward the open door. Marquita entered.

A cold gust of fear swept across Katherine's heart. She sensed this visit was a sequel to the earlier one and boded no good.

Marquita ignored Clay, flashed a smile from between moist, red lips. She halted at the counter, leaned an elbow on it, cradled her chin in a palm. Her dark eyes glimmered mischievously at Katherine.

"I come tell you it is no trade," she said.

"What's this nonsense about you being Strang's wife and going to kill him?" Clay asked.

Marquita gave him a quick, scornful glance from her dark eyes, then ignoring him turned her eyes upon Katherine.

"What I'm tell you today is wrong, for my mind it is change. I will not kill Phil." She chuckled delightedly. "Today he get robbed for t'ree t'ousand peso. Red head bandido

hold him up and take his dinero. It is big joke on this so smart Phil. Bandido, he ride like blazes for Mexico."

"You mean," demanded Clay, "Strang was robbed today?"

Marquita kept her eyes on Katherine. "Sure t'ing. Kitty, Marquita come to tell you somet'ing because she like you. I will not be widow, and I will not own mule, pick, shovel and camp. Tonight, I'm go away."

"Away?" Katherine frowned. "Where?"

Marquita smiled coyly, slowly closing and opening a dark, expressive eye in a broad wink.

"Maybe." She lifted her eyebrows. "I'm ride to Mexico with a very 'ansome redhead bandido. Who know, huh? I'm go now while so smart Phil is ride to get paper which will not let you take mule away."

Clay's big body suddenly stiffened. Consternation widened his eyes.

"You mean Strang is gettin' a court order to prevent our movin' the mules out of the county?"

"That's right, you big stiff!" Marquita snapped at him. "I'm go now. Goodby, Kitty." Then with a final, scornful glance at Clay, she said, "I don't lofe you no more, but Marquita like Kitty. And if she lofe you, I 'ope you get marry and 'ave six kids!"

She turned, slipped away swift as a shadow.

Katherine looked at Clay from stricken eyes.

""Clay!" she whispered between a sob and a tear. "We're euchred!"

It was with leaden hearts that they kissed and parted a short time later.

The next day, it rained. A hard, sullen rain churning the grade into a quagmire so work was impossible. The men went to the tent saloon. Clay rode down the line to interview contractors that might be persuaded to pay off the mortgage and accept a bonus from the next job.

ALONE in the commissary, Katherine was filled with heartaching dread of the day when she must return home. She suffered agonies thinking of the effect on her father. She had written him cheerful, glowing letters. Painting a bright picture of the future. Now, there was no future.

She was growing afraid of herself. Afraid of her own weakness. Clay's kisses stirred her mind into chaos. It filled her heart with dull, aching pain to deny his entreaties that they get married. But always, in her mind, was the image of a graying, pain-wracked man in a wheel chair. She could never forget the time she had come upon him just as he was lifting the gun to his temple. If she married Clay, her father would think himself a barrier to their happiness. No argument could make him believe otherwise.

The rain beat a sad, dreary dirge against the roof. Misery Peters, swathed in a yellow slicker, came in, water dripping about his feet. Katherine greeted him, rose and lighted the hanging lamp over the counter. Outside, the day was leaden.

"I'm afraid there's goin' to be trouble, ma'am," he said grimly and she noted his small, wizened face was taut. "Some of the boys got talkin' too loud about thet land we were goin' to file on down in New Mexico. Strang sent men down there to file on ten parcels. It means we'll be cut off from water. When the boys hear, they're sure to be fightin' mad. They'll forget about finishin' this job and tie into Strang."

Katherine laughed without mirth.

"It won't matter much whether we finish or not, Misery," she said dejectedly. "But I'm not surprised that Strang moved in on you."

"This thing might help you and Clay, ma'am," he said, his voice harsh. "When the boys learn about what Strang's done, they ain't goin' to stop with talk. I don't know how the law stands, but if Strang was dead, he couldn't collect a mortgage."

"No, Misery, no!" she cried, her eyes frightened. "That would be murder."

"They ain't goin' to think what it is, ma'am," he said grimly. "Us fellers have slaved and saved so we could settle down and work for ourselves. Strang has gone money and power crazy. Fellers like him are bad as mad dogs." He peered beyond her into the shadowed interior of the commissary. "Where's Clay?"

"He rode downgrade."

"I better go get him," said Misery. "He's the only one kin handle the boys when they're drinkin. If they're goin' to tear Strang apart, they'd better be sober."

She watched him tramp out into the gray fog of down beating rain. She was suddenly chilled, and shaken. In a strangely queer way, she found herself filled with an apprehensive dread.

She realized that her hatred of Strang was thrust aside by some greater force. No matter that his death meant salvation for her,

she must try to avert that death. Not for a moment did she question Misery's warning.

She knew the wild, reckless murder-crazed fury that an act such as Strang's could generate in otherwise peaceful graders. They would lose their last dollar cheerfully at gambling. They would share their last cent with another. But when they felt themselves cheated, tricked, they would explode in destructive retaliation against the man who had tricked them.

She heard the hoofbeats of a horse, and surmised Misery was riding after Clay. But if the men, now drinking in the tent saloon, learned what had happened, it would be too late before Clay could intervene!

CHAPTER VI

Loyal Friends

DASHING back to her bedroom, Katherine jerked a yellow slicker from the wall. These graders were her men. She had to prevent them from doing a thing that would make them outlaws.

Swiftly, she buttoned the slicker about her slim figure and pulled the black Stetson down over her golden hair. She raced toward the front door, then stopped short at the sound of hard-pounding hooves.

Her first thought was that Misery had met Clay, but there was only one horse. Now, the horse turned into the camp street, came in a quick clop-clop toward the commissary.

A rider drew up at the doorway, swung out of the saddle. Orange lamplight from the overhead lamp glistened on a wet, black rubber coat. Strang stepped inside, removed his rain-sodden hat.

"I happened to be down-grade and thought I'd stop in out of the rain," he said, smiling.

Katherine felt cold shivers of fear chase over her.

"I was just starting to your place," she said tautly. "Those men on whose land you filed are going to cause you trouble."

His brows quirked above his dark eyes.

"Trouble? I doubt it, Miss Burke. I have men hired to take care of that kind of thing." He brushed a hand across the sheen of his black hair. "Miss Burke, it was another reason beside the rain which prompted me to stop."

"You fool!" she cried. "Do you think the men you have hired can stop bloodshed? Those twenty-five men?"

"Not my blood, Miss Burke." Then suddenly, she saw his dark eyes narrow. "I am considering the giving up of that land. In fact, I am thinking of selling out and going East. I have been fortunate in my mining investments. I feel the same way about ownership of a grading outfit. I am sure that Mr. Vallory could continue to operate this outfit in a manner that would enable him to clear its indebtedness. Should I go East, I would immediately renew the mortgage for one year."

Katherine stared at him as though he were some strange, unbelievable apparition that had crept from the dark shadows of the long room.

"Y-you will give us a renewal?" Her voice was shaken, incredulous.

"I have been a gambler, Miss Burke," Strang continued, his dark eyes upon her intently. "Men of my kind are seldom swayed by emotion. But for the first time in my life, I have encountered a force stronger than I." She stared at him, uncomprehending. She had a strange feeling that there was urgent desperation behind those dark eyes.

"I want you to marry me," he said quietly.

She stiffened, her eyes wide with shocked amazement. She started to speak, his upraised hand halted her.

"Please! I know all the things that are swirling in your mind. My own has been in turmoil. I have become a wealthy man. I want to go back to civilization with you as my wife. You're too young, too beautiful, to waste your life in this wild country. In Chicago, New York, London, there is life, gaiety, music. Fine clothes and jewels."

Her eyes held on him, fascinated. Somehow, he seemed a different man than the Strang she had known. She shook her head.

"I don't love you."

"You will learn to. Think what it will mean to your father to be well again. Think of what, with my wealth, you could do for your family."

"I love Clay Vallory," she said steadily.

"You are only fascinated," he said. "Katherine, think what I can do for you. Give me a chance to prove you will love me. Marry me. I am not trying to buy you. I love you. I'm willing to buy the chance to win your love. If after a year, you don't love me, divorce me. It isn't much to ask. You're young.

One year out of your life in return for happiness to those you love. Give me that chance."

"A-and if I refuse?"

STRANG'S face darkened. "Don't!" he pleaded. "Give me that year. I don't want to make you suffer, but if you refuse, you won't be able to give your loved ones what they need. I'm going to fight for you, Katherine."

"If I refuse, you'll foreclose—break me?"

"A man fights for the thing he wants most. I want you. Don't answer me now, you're angry. I ask only for a year. A year to prove you'll love me."

He gave her no chance to reply, but turned abruptly and strode through the doorway. She heard the swift pound of his horse going away through the gray rain.

One year. One year in return for the happiness of her loved ones. No, not one year. Her happiness, and Clay's. Was the price too high to pay for taking a graying, pain-wracked man from a wheel chair and making him well again?

She walked slowly back to her room, pulling off the slicker numbly and casting it upon the floor. She dropped upon the cot, sat staring at the floor dully. She was dimly aware of distant shouts and later, of tramping feet, loud voices. Men were stampeding toward the mess-hall.

She sat up, giving a start. She hadn't heard the supper gong. She thought almost all the graders had gone to the tent saloon.

Misery came hurrying in, his hat drooping soddenly about his small face. His bright, birdlike eyes were excited.

There was a man with him. A tall, thin man in a flat-crowned black hat and a long, sad face. His black mohair suit was water-soaked.

"This is th' Reverend Davis, ma'am," Misery said. "I'm leavin' him with you for a while. We're holdin' a meetin' in the cookhouse."

Misery hurried out without further explanation. Katherine looked at the parson from startled eyes.

"Howdy-do, ma'am," he said gravely. "I am not certain why I am here. But the men were about to become involved in violence and my presence may restrain them."

"That's why they are holding a meeting?" she asked swiftly. "They intend returning to the saloon?"

"I hope not, ma'am," he said fervently. "That den of iniquity . . ." He broke off suddenly, his face shocked with concern. "That explains it!" he cried. "They brought me here so that I would not intervene when they return. Ma'am, have you any influence with these men?"

Heavy footsteps tromped through the doorway. Katherine saw "Big Bill" Muldoon halt in front of the counter. His craggy features were wet with rain, his red hair was awry. He looked at her gravely.

"Ma'am, th' boys would like to have you and the parson step over to the cookhouse."

She looked at him apprehensively. "Bill, you boys aren't going to do something you'll regret?"

"Ma'am, we're goin' to do somethin' to be happy about all our lives," he said solemnly. "Misery said he told you about Strang cuttin' the water off from our land by havin' it filed on. Well, ma'am, us boys have talked it over an' we aim to—"

"No, Bill!" she cried. "I'll talk to the boys. It will only mean futile bloodshed. Where's Clay and Misery?"

Bill grinned.

"Misery is keepin' Clay in his tent, but I ain't shore how long he can hold him."

Taut with apprehension, Katherine followed Big Bill back to the cookhouse, the parson trotting along behind her. She found twenty-five solemn looking men gathered about the tables. They observed her gravely as she stood at the far end of the table and confronted them white-faced.

"Boys," her voice was pleading. "I know how you feel. I can't blame you, but it's wrong."

"Wait a minute, ma'am," Big Bill interposed. "Let me outline the whole plan so you'll understand. This is goin' to be a mighty important thing to all of us. Like you know, we filed on that land an' Strang sent men down to grab off parcels which would cut us off from water. The only way we could get water on to our tract would be by cuttin' through a hill an' diggin' three miles of canal. There's only twenty-five of us, and with picks and shovels, it'd take us months to do it."

HE GRINNED at her wryly, and then went on with his story:

"We was down at Strang's saloon when we heard what he'd done. We organized a hangin' party and then discovered Strang

wasn't around. The parson," Big Bill nodded solemnly at the sad-faced man, "argued us out of doin' anything on impulse. So, we started back to camp to get our guns. Then we met up with Clay and Misery. They talked us into a new idea.

"We aim to even up with Strang in a way he'll never forget. Ma'am, with a gradin' outfit, we can level down that hill and cut a canal in jig time. Clay says you'll be willin' to do the job as soon as you've finished the contract on the Sante Fe. And us twenty-five fellers, talkin' it over among ourselves, figgered an extra year's wages would allow us to buy a shore 'nough herd of cows."

Big Bill paused, beamed at her. Katherine felt tears sting her eyes. She understood what Clay had done. Desperate to avert violence, he had grasped at the thing he thought might divert them from trouble with Strang. But what would happen when they learned that the grading outfit they needed to solve their problem was also owned by Strang?

One year! One year!

It beat against her brain as she stood here facing these solemn faced men. An agony of indecision ached within her. It was within her power to solve the problems of these men. To provide for her family. To give Clay the outfit. She need only say "Yes" to Strang.

One year!

Footsteps sloshed through the mud and rain. Clay and Misery entered. Clay came swiftly to Katherine. His clothes were sodden. Mud had splattered his face. It clung in gooey lumps to his boots.

Misery stamped down the floor, his wizened face glistening with rain. He grinned at Katherine, then looked at the seated men.

"This is shore a rotten day for a weddin', but I bet right now the bride and bridegroom don't know it's rainin'. Come on, parson. Let's get this started."

Katherine caught her breath, looked wide-eyed at Clay.

"Business first, parson," the voice of Big Bill boomed. "We got to get a paper fixed up."

"Paper, bosh!" Misery growled. "We're goin' to have a weddin' first."

There were shouts of assent, laughter. Katherine looked at Clay.

How could she tell him? How could she tell these men?

"Wait a minute," Clay called. Then he looked down into Katherine's pale, agonized face. "Honey, nobody has told you. The boys wanted it to be a surprise. But you're thinkin' of your dad and th' kids, ain't you?"

"Yes, Clay," she whispered. "Oh, my darling!"

"It's all right, sweet. Instead of movin' onto their land this year, the boys are goin' to the Sante Fe with us. When we're through there, we'll do their job—"

"But the mortgage, Clay! What about that?"

"The boys are takin' it over, sweet. They've saved up three or four hundred dollars apiece. They're all antein' up, the money will be more than suffiicent. . . ."

The pounding rain still continued to beat down. Gray mist crept up from the ground, shrouding the hills. Katherine's hair was wet, rain glistened in droplets upon her face. She and Clay were standing in the commissary door.

"Clay." She lifted her face. "The sun is shining, the birds are singing. Oh, darling, it's the most wonderful day of my life!"

His arm pulled her against him. He laughed softly.

"It's raining, Kitten, and good for all night."

"Not in my life, darling." She raised her face, tilted her head.

"Kiss your wife!" she whispered.

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FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

THE GIRL FROM NEW ENGLAND

A Complete Romantic Novelet of the Frontier

By MARIAN O'HEARN

PLUS MANY OTHER GLAMOROUS NOVELETS AND STORIES!

"When are you going to realize you're grown up?" he drawled

Her Own Boss

By RAY VICKER

Ginnie Malcolm, who rods her own outfit, may boast of her independence — but her woman's heart betrays her!

GINNIE MALCOLM was bending over a break in the fence of the South Fork pasture when she saw Clint Lawton's gelding loping down the autumn-brown draw. Her heart began to telegraph consternation and a warm flush painted her tanned cheeks with a color that matched her auburn hair.

She picked up the strands of broken wire in her gloved hands, hid her confusion with indifference. She was irritated that the young neighboring rancher could cause such tremors to shoot along her spine, because she and Clint were worlds apart in their ideas.

The Southern bred rancher still had plantation society notions of a woman's fragility. And since Ginnie's dad had died, she had run the Bar M as well as any man could have done. So she rebelled at thought of a

wallflower existence.

Clint Lawton swung lazily from his saddle, Stetson in hand. His lips twisted into a smile as if something about her made him feel like laughing. That faint grin rasped on her nerves, for she felt that his gray eyes were prying into her heart and seeing things of which she herself was only vaguely aware.

"Hi, Boss!" he greeted, a twinkle in his eyes.

She blushed as he ironically used the title given her by her cowboys. He leaned against the flank of his black gelding, tall and bronzed, with close-clipped dark hair that stood up straight on his head. His languor hid the steel beneath. At times he could be as stubborn as an untamed bronc, Ginnie knew—and she lived for the day that she could tame him.

But now she merely tendered him a cool nod. Not for anything would she reveal her true feelings until he realized a woman was not a fragile piece of china to be placed on a shelf.

"Let me do that!" Patronizingly he reached for the pliers in her hands.

She jerked the pliers away with the anger that always swept through her slender body when someone suggested she couldn't handle a job because of her sex.

"Thanks! I can fix this myself."

Her pert nose tilted challengingly. Had she been a man, folks might have said she had a chip on her shoulder.

His cool eyes clouded with disapproval as his gaze drifted over her denim trousers and wool shirt.

"When you going to realize you're grown-up?" he drawled. "It ain't right for a woman to gallivant around the range, ropin' and brandin' and campin' with the ranch hands. You look like a forty-a-month cowboy in that rig."

WHO was he to tell her what was right or wrong? She straightened, slim as the young maples in the draw, her glowing auburn hair catching the tint of the leaves as if she had somehow captured the beauty of autumn in her own determined body.

"Thank you for telling me how I look," she declared icily.

Every time she met Clint, it seemed, they wound up fighting. He couldn't see that no high-spirited girl wants a man to dominate her.

"You'd be right pretty in a dress, though." His eyes traveled over her in leisurely admiration, and she flushed deeper, with the sense of impotence that he aroused in her.

A tremor shook her as Clint slid to her side. Her throat tightened and she fought against the weakness that overwhelmed her. She had to be strong. She wasn't going to bow humbly to Clint Lawton. Not until he realized that she had a mind of her own, too.

He towered above her, a mocking grin on his lips.

"Your birthday's tomorrow, Ginnie," he said, bending his head until his breath fanned her cheeks. "I have somethin' for you."

Her eyes flashed with a glad sparkle that wiped away the barrier she had been trying to erect to hold him back. He had remembered!

"That's nice of you," she said demurely, noticing the package under his arm. Her eyes focused on the box and she couldn't hide the eager curiosity that brightened her face.

Clint reached for a pocket, then caught her eyes on the box under his arm. A mischievous glint fanned across his lean, tanned face.

"Maybe this would do at that," he drawled, handing her the box.

The flush of expectancy died on her face, changed to hard anger. She stared at the label on a box of cigars.

"Is this your idea of a joke?"

Angrily she flung the cigars onto the frosty ground. A sudden gust of October breeze whipped through the glade, whirling dead leaves in its wake and sweeping away the brief hope that had been in her heart. His crude humor stabbed deep. Behind her anger was a lake of tears that threatened to burst the dam in her eyes.

Sudden contrition wiped the grin off Clint's face.

"Gee, Ginnie, I was only kidding," he apologized, reaching unsuccessfully for her hand. "That was a poor joke, but you do make me mad the way you try to be a man instead of the sweet girl you were meant to be."

She wanted to cry, but checked the tears, unwilling to concede even such a feminine gesture to Clint Lawton.

"I'd have taken the cigars, but they aren't my brand," she forced herself to say coldly.

"Don't be like that," he mumbled. "Those cigars were mine. But I really did get you somethin'." He groped in a pocket.

She peeked through angry tears at the heart-shaped gold brooch in his brown hand and a lump caught in her throat. Clint Lawton's Circle Dot and her own Bar M brands were entwined on the brooch to form a Bar Circle Dot M. Her heart stopped for a brief second, then pounded with a force that drove resentment away. Was this a proposal?

Clint dropped the brooch into her small hand. Then he shattered the golden dreams that lifted her to the clouds.

"I wanted to get you somethin' you couldn't wear with anything but a dress," he said. "Cause that's all you'll be wearin' when you

marry me."

That did it! He didn't even bother to propose. When would he realize that a girl had some pride? Ginnie hurled the brooch onto the ground.

"And what makes you think I'll marry you?" she demanded.

"It's about time you got over this foolishness."

He loomed above her, his body blotting out the gray sky. Before she realized it his arms had wrapped around her. She struggled vainly against him, and then a strange weakness sapped her strength. She could feel his heart beating close against hers as if urging her to forget reason in this one mad moment of ecstasy.

Clint bent down and his soft breath caressed her cheek. Then she was swimming in a world of misty happiness, her lips locked tight against his. For a few brief seconds she surrendered completely to the impulse that wiped out all other thoughts. Perhaps, after all, it would be good to relinquish her freedom.

"Ginnie!" Clint breathed low, still clasping her tight. "You don't belong in overalls. Runnin' a ranch is a man's job. From now on you're stayin' close to the ranchhouse."

THERE he was again, spoiling her happiness just when she was ready to give her heart to him. He could have asked her to marry him now, and she would have agreed. But when he tried to dictate to her, that was something else.

She pulled herself away. "I'll step out of overalls and marry you the day I find I can't run my ranch as well as any man!" she flared.

For a long moment Clint's eyes bored into hers, reading the obstinate pride that raised a wall between them.

"All right," he said. "That's a promise." His voice cracked with emotion. "When you find your ranch is goin' to the dogs, come to me. I'll be waitin'! Until then, good-by."

He whirled around, strode to his gelding, and was off at a gallop. She stared after him with misty eyes, fighting the impulse to call him back. But pride won the brief skirmish with her heart.

Her poignant loneliness deepened as his broad back grew smaller on the trail that snaked through the autumn-scarred hills. The plaintive cry of a whippoorwill from a leafless hackberry thicket sighed for the departed summer. A flock of geese honked overhead in the iron-gray sky, and it seemed to Ginnie that the sunshine in her heart was winging away with the birds, leaving a shell as cold and desolate as the land.

Wearily she climbed into her saddle, headed toward the ranchhouse. She wanted to cry, to give full rein to the weight of sorrow that left her body a listless automaton.

The trail broadened into a wide valley set between high wooded ridges dotted with sandstone outcroppings. Then, ahead, the low, rambling house huddled beneath a grove of friendly sycamores. A brook coursed with the merry aimlessness of a child through the cut hay-fields of the meadow. Stacks of timothy sprinkled the brown landscape.

She reined the bay at the cedar post corral, and sensed trouble when she saw Max Grady, her foreman, hunkered on the steps of the veranda with her other three cowboys. Grady belonged with the South Fork roundup.

Grady pushed his big body to his feet. A frown darkened his ruggedly handsome features and his face was flushed. But it was not because of embarrassment, for his bold eyes revealed that he had long since lost the ability to register that emotion.

Ginnie shoved thoughts of Clint into the back of her mind. First and foremost she was a rancher.

"What are you boys doing away from the South Fork?" she demanded, burying her femininity under a layer of authority.

Pete Murdee, "Smoky" Johnson, and "Tex" Renegen shifted with the embarrassment of which they were always conscious in her presence.

"A long-loopin' coyote beat us to most of those steers," Grady said quietly.

Ginnie caught her breath. So far rustlers had left the Bar M alone. And the loss of that herd would be a serious blow to the ranch.

"We found an old camp-fire left by that rustler," continued Grady, softly. "And Murdee picked up somethin' that might interest you."

Grady's eyes looked her over with the covetous expression that were in them too often to suit Ginnie. Had he not been such a competent cattleman she would have fired him long ago for that.

Murdee's runty, bowlegged figure shuffled to one of the horses at the rail. His square face bent over his saddle-bag and his dull eyes sparked when he held up a handworked silver spur with carved initials.

"There's only one man in the valley with CL for initials," Grady said curtly, "and he's the man who's been rustlin' your cattle."

Tex Renegan straightened his youthful, gangling body and his hard eyes gleamed like agates in his beardless face when he mumbled Clint Lawton's name.

Ginnie gasped and swayed weakly against the pine board shaft of the horse trough pump. Clint Lawton a rustler! She couldn't believe it.

Then she remembered how she had met Clint coming from the direction of her South Fork herd. A sudden idea sneaked furtively into her head, chased away the wishful thoughts that every young girl weaves to protect her man. Was Clint trying in an underhand way to prove that running a ranch was too much of a job for her? She knew how much he wanted her to quit ranching and marry him.

COLOR flowed in a deep wave into her cheeks and her hazel eyes filled with the sting of the sharp breeze rustling through the half-naked trees in the yard. If Clint could resort to such a low trick, then he wasn't the man for her.

Max Grady patted the staghorn .45 on his hip. "If I catch that Lawton on our range," he said, "he'll be pushin' up daisies right quick."

Ginnie's lips set grimly. "I'll attend to Lawton. You boys get back to work with the main herd."

Ginnie remounted her wiry bay, kicked her heels against its sides. She didn't have enough evidence for the sheriff but she had to confront Clint with that rustling charge. Fervently she hoped that he could prove his innocence.

The crisp autumn wind beat against her face, fanning her hair into a shimmering stream behind her. The tang in the air failed to cool the hot thoughts boiling in her mind. If Clint had anything to do with rustling her herd, then she would back up Max Grady herself.

She skirted the fence that separated the Bar M from the Circle Dot, passed through the barbed wire gate, and urged the mare toward the cluster of heavy log-sided buildings that radiated the strength and reliability she had always associated with Clint Lawton.

Clint stepped from the lean-to workshop adjoining the barn, an ancient Colt in his hand. He collected old guns as a hobby. Apparently he had been cleaning one of them.

"You sure seem all het up about somethin'," he said, buttoning his jacket against the cold. "You tired of wearin' overalls already?" A grin quirked his lips, but seriousness lay beneath the twinkle in his gray eyes.

Ginnie's eyes widened as she focused her gaze on a hide stretched across the bars of the corral. A knife stabbed into her heart, killing the hope she had entertained for his innocence. The Bar M sign on the skin seared into her vision, branding his guilt on her mind.

"Most of my South Fork herd is gone," she said crisply. Blood drained from her face and her voice crackled like a frozen twig. "Rustled!"

"So you came to me for help?" Eagerness in his voice further confirmed her suspicions.

"No!" The gray sky behind Ginnie's head formed a drab background that intensified her dark beauty, and for the first time he noticed the storm clouds in her eyes. "Grady and the boys picked up the trail of the rustler. They found this." She tossed the spur toward him with contempt.

Clint caught the spur in his hand, a frown on his bronzed forehead. His perplexity stamped question marks on his lean face. Then he stiffened, locked his eyes with hers in a glance replete with anger.

"So you think I rustled your cattle?"

"What else should I think when I can see one of my own hides on your corral?" she flared.

He rocked back on his heels as if hit hard, but lips locked in a mute line.

"If this is the method you would use to force me to marry you, then I'm glad I found you out in time," she said furiously. "If you know what is good for you, you will stay away from the Bar M."

Clint stood stiff and straight, his boots spread wide apart on the hard-packed red clay of the yard, his face shadowed in the pale light of the dying day.

She waited for a brief moment, expecting him to mumble explanations. Then she whirled her bay around and touched spurs, afraid that Clint would see the hot tears in her eyes.

Those scalding tears squeezed from her heart on the somber ride home through the twilight haze. She loved Clint. She had to admit that. But his pettiness had smashed all her dreams.

In the next few days Ginnie lived in the saddle as she attempted to forget her aching heart in business of the roundup. She rode from sunup to sundown, searching in the isolated canyons and arroyos for mavericks and wandering steers that meant the difference between a profit or a loss for the season.

She was on a remote section of her range one cold, sunny morning when she came across cattle tracks. She stiffened with anger, cheeks flaming. The tracks of a dozen steers were grouped together facing the mountains. Rustlers had struck at her herd again!

She straightened in the saddle at the faint clop of approaching hoofs. Quickly she prodded her bay into a choke-cherry thicket, dropped to her feet, and jerked the Winchester from her saddle scabbard. Maybe that rustler was coming back.

A RIDER jogged into sight. He was bending low, intent on the tracks of the cattle, but even at that distance Ginnie recog-

nized Clint Lawton.

Grimly she pumped the lever of the .30-.30. Some of her cattle had been rustled just recently and here was Clint riding from the direction those cattle had taken. She meant to see that Clint faced the punishment he deserved.

"Don't move, Clint!" she cried, stepping from the thicket with leveled rifle.

Clint's hand instinctively leaped toward his holster, then he recognized Ginnie and relaxed.

"Out huntin' rustlers?" He grinned cynically. His leather chaps creaked as he shifted himself in his silver-mounted saddle.

"Yes!" she snapped. "And I've found one. You!"

The bright, cold sunlight glinted on the rifle in her hands and her breath clouded when she spoke. His eyes locked with hers and she could feel the strength that flowed from his tall figure.

"In case you want to know," he said, "I'm here lookin' for those rustlers myself. I'm backtrackin' to see where those steers came from."

Ginnie laughed bitterly. Now he was lying to clear himself.

"You don't have to look further," she said tightly. "Those tracks lead back to my range."

He nodded. "That's what I thought."

His cold callousness in the face of exposure nettled her more than his lying.

"Drop your gun-belt," she ordered acidly. "I'm taking you in to the sheriff."

"You're makin' a big mistake, Ginnie," he protested, unhitching his studded holsters.

"Tell it to the sheriff," she flung back at him, motioning him up the trail with the Winchester.

He shrugged his shoulders, and stubborn lines clamped his lips tight together.

All of Ginnie's misery concentrated in her heart when she stared at Clint's stiff back ahead of her. In her preoccupation she scarcely noticed the sandstone buttes and granite ridges through which they rode.

Abruptly they rounded the shoulder of a hogback, and Clint reined with a sharp exclamation. Smoke curled from the adobe chimney of an abandoned prospector's shack hugging an obsidian wall of the canyon.

Clint pointed a lean finger. "There's your rustlers!"

Excitement flushed Ginnie's cheeks and she darted a hopeful glance toward the frame cabin, but slumped back in her saddle at sight of the four horses tethered to the porch rail.

"Nonsense! Those horses belong to my boys."

She gestured Clint on with the rifle and wondered vaguely why her cowboys were not on the far side of the range with the main herd. She would find out as soon as she turned Clint over to them.

Max Grady stepped onto the tumble-down porch, saw Ginnie, and uttered a startled yell that brought the other three cowboys outside.

"Here's a rustler you boys can hogtie for the sheriff," Ginnie said, slipping from her saddle.

"Yeah!" Grady slouched forward, a cruel smirk on his red face.

Clint met the foreman's hard eyes, unafraid.

"Nice set-up, Grady." He stared around the floor of the canyon. "Cattle pens and everything! How long have you been drivin' Bar M cattle over the Guadaloupe Range to Sandy Flats?"

Grady cursed, and Ginnie's eyes widened when she saw a dozen white-faced steers milling in a cedar post corral half-hidden in stunted jackpine along the wall of the cliff. She whirled to face her foreman.

With a snarl Grady smashed the rifle from her hands. Six-guns leaped into the hands of her other cowboys, covering her and Clint.

"So you are behind this rustling!" With a guilty pang Ginnie realized how much she had wronged Clint.

Grady swept his sombrero from his head with a mocking gesture, bowed to her.

"As a woman you are beautiful, Ginnie, but as a range boss you are a bit too trusting."

Ginnie bit her lip and sneaked a contrite glance at Clint. Then all her sympathy for him suddenly vanished. For a wide grin was on his face, as if he were actually enjoying her plight.

Clint swung easily from saddle, a genial expression on his tanned face.

"Guess you showed her that it ain't a woman's job runnin' a ranch," he drawled. "That's what I been tryin' to tell her for months."

GINNIE stared at him, scarcely willing to believe her ears. Surely he couldn't condone Grady's treachery merely to placate his own ego.

Pete Murdee's cracked voice broke in. "What we goin' to do now, Boss?" he asked Grady, and anxiety trembled in his words. "We can't stay here no more."

Grady hesitated, his narrowed eyes studying Ginnie.

"No," he said. "We can't stay here no more—but there's some things we can take with us when we go."

"The main herd, huh?" Smoky Johnson interjected. He was a half-breed Paiute with an inscrutable expression on his lean dark face that Ginnie had never been able to

fathom.

Clint whistled. "That'll break the Bar M, sure." He didn't seem displeased.

Ignoring the six-shooters he nonchalantly adjusted the cinch of his saddle.

Grady's small eyes, as bleak as the chill autumn wind, swept over Clint.

"You seem right happy about this deal, Lawton," he drawled, "but just to make sure you won't interfere I'm keeping you and the girl in the cabin with Murdee till we come by with the herd."

Clint shrugged, began to unsaddle his black. Murdee stepped forward, his dull eyes shining at sight of the tooled leather workmanship of the saddle.

"I'm claimin' that saddle right now, Boss," he said. "All right?"

Grady nodded, and prodded Clint and Ginnie into the dusty cabin. Murdee followed, triumphantly bearing the saddle as if he expected one of the others to cheat him of his booty.

Swiftly Grady bound Clint to a rickety chair. Then, with a thunder of hoofs, he and the other punchers were gone, leaving Murdee behind as a guard.

The outlaw hunched over the table with a deck of cards, his .45 at his elbow. Ginnie slumped weakly into another chair under Murdee's watchful eyes, numbed by the dual calamity that had struck both her heart and her ranch. Instead of offering sympathy Clint appeared to be deliberately flaunting his indifference.

Clint grinned, despite his bonds, and began to sing a rollicking trail song. His melodious voice grated on Ginnie's nerves. The ache in her heart deepened. Her ranch was being looted, and she had an idea what to expect when Grady returned. Yet Clint didn't seem to care.

"Shut up!" barked Murdee, sullenly. "You sound like a dying calf."

Clint ignored the outlaw, broke into the English version of "Rancho Grande." He sang with the lilting rhythm that comes from a light heart.

Ginnie snapped an angry glance at him, then paused. Clint was singing lustily, but his earnest eyes were trying to send her a message.

She tensed, forgot her lassitude. In that instant when their eyes met, the flint of her pride struck the steel of his strong will and the spark that leaped between them belonged to both. She knew then that she would never doubt Clint again. He had been merely trying to lull Murdee's suspicions by his indifference.

Clint cocked his head toward the floor, still singing, "Give me a ranch and my saddle." Ginnie gulped, realizing what he was trying to tell her.

"Cuss it, shut up!" Murdee slammed the cards onto the table, and fingered the .45.

"All right." Clint nodded good-naturedly. "I'll settle for a drink of water. What do you say?"

Grumpily Murdee shoved himself to his feet, jammed the Colt in his belt, and shuffled toward the oak bucket in a dim corner. Ginnie shifted her chair. Furtively her eyes glued on the outlaw's back as she bent down and groped in Clint's saddle-bag. Fingers wrapped around a small derringer. She straightened, the pistol concealed in her hand.

Murdee waddled back with the dipper, muttering to himself. Ginnie jerked the derringer up.

"Don't move, Murdee," she said evenly, "or this might go off."

Murdee's eyes bulged and the dipper slipped from his fingers with a crash. All his belligerence melted and his hands shook when he untied Clint's bonds at her command. In a moment Murdee was securely tied in Clint's place.

"Clint! I've been a proud, stubborn fool!" Ginnie groped for words to express her contrition. She tried to meet his eyes and couldn't. Then, because she was feminine, her lips quivered and she began to cry.

"We've both been stubborn, but that's all over now," he whispered tenderly.

His arms stole around her, strong and protecting, and she knew she didn't want to be alone again, ever, not when she could have him to lean on. Then he pushed her resolutely away.

"We've got to stop Grady, Ginnie," he said, thrusting Murdee's revolver into his holster.

SWIFTLY she helped him saddle two of the horses in the corral. Now all her misery and fear were gone. She had a man to look after her. That thought created a comfortable glow that all her independence had never achieved. She stared at Clint with adoring eyes and shivered half from delight and half from the cold that caked a thin layer of ice over a puddle in the yard.

Side by side they rode up the canyon and the jogging of the horses raised the dark head of reality into the glowing sunrise of Ginnie's dreams. If Grady escaped with the main herd, the Bar M would be finished. And there was only Clint to oppose three rustlers.

Grady was cruel and merciless. He would fight to keep the cattle. What if something happened to Clint on the very threshold of their happiness?

Then Clint was talking.

"A rattler finished one of your steers on my range," he said, "and I paid Grady for that hide you saw on my corral fence. When

you accused me of rustlin' I just got too all-fired stubborn mad to explain anything to you."

He reined in suddenly. From up the steep-walled canyon came the bellowing and snorting of cattle. A cloud of dust billowed into the wind and hoofs rumbled like an approaching thunderstorm.

The first of the steers trotted into sight. Then a shot exploded, echoed crisply from the grim, granite walls. Ginnie stiffened, clutched Clint's arm. More shots cracked. Three riders, doll-like at that distance, whooped and shouted on the far side of the herd.

"Grady's spotted us!" shouted Clint. "He's tryin' to stampede the herd."

Ginnie blanched, and her eyes filled with horror as the spooked cattle milled forward. The steep walls of the canyon, white with frost, glistened like unscalable icebergs.

"Come on!" Clint yelled.

Their only escape was to outride the maddened cattle.

Like a roaring avalanche the stampeding herd charged toward them, snorting and bawling, the thunder of hoofs rising into a terrifying crescendo of sound that shook the parched brown canyon floor with the unleased fury of a thousand demons.

Ginnie's mustang whinnied with fear. Suddenly the mount stumbled, went lame. Gamely the mare tried to go on, then faltered to her knees.

"Go on, Clint!" cried Ginnie, forgetting her own peril in concern for the man she loved.

Behind her the cattle surged forward, driven by popping six-guns.

Clint leaped from his saddle. His eyes darted around the sheer walls of the canyon. There was no escape. One horse could never carry both of them to safety and the terrified herd was bearing down on them.

Ginnie flung herself into Clint's arms, but he pushed her away.

"Wait!" he mumbled, sniffing at the stiff breeze in the canyon.

Hastily he coiled his lariat around a dry sagebrush, thumbed a match, lit the tinder-like branches. The bush crackled into a blaze of flame.

Clint vaulted into saddle, spurred the pinto across the brown grass of the canyon. The burning sagebrush trailed behind like a streaming comet.

Ginnie's eyes flashed with hope as she saw what he was doing. The grass ignited and the breeze fanned the flames into a wall of roaring fire that swept to meet the rush of the oncoming cattle.

The tang of grass smoke choked the air. Red flames licked waist high in a sputtering wave that rolled up the canyon. The herd wavered, came to a milling stop at this new menace that was greater than their fear of six-guns behind.

The heat-maddened cattle churned around and stampeded back up the canyon. Too late Grady and his cowboys saw their danger. Ginnie caught a glimpse of Grady through the pall of smoke and flame. His mount stumbled and both horse and rider were buried under grinding hoofs.

GINNIE swayed dizzily, would have fallen had not Clint's arms closed around her. This day had showed her just how feminine she actually was, how much she needed a man to look after her.

"That fire will burn itself out in a few miles on the shale slopes," he said, "and your cattle will run themselves out."

She snuggled close to his strong body, thrilling at the tenderness in the arms that enveloped her.

"Ginnie." His voice caressed her ears. He took out the gold brooch he had once tried to give her. "I went back for this after you left. Will you take it now? You can wear it on any outfit you like, just so you marry me."

Her eyes sparked in a face flushed with happiness.

"Oh, Clint!" she murmured, taking the brooch in her small hand. "I've been waiting so long for you to say that. Any girl would gladly exchange overalls for a wedding dress, but a man has to remember a girl has some pride. I didn't want to let you boss me around before ever we were married."

Clint's lips hushed her voice and she panted with the breathless joy of his kiss.

"You don't ever have to worry any more about me doing what you don't like, Clint," she whispered.

Then she tipped her head to again welcome his soft caress, wondering how she had ever valued her independence above this sweet reliance that drew her to him.

NEXT ISSUE

SENORITA WHIRLWIND

A Fascinating Novelet by JOHNSTON McCULLEY

A Hattie Pringle Howler

Hattie's fists thudded like piledrivers atop Yuma's bony noggin

Lore Pardners

By JOE ARCHIBALD

It takes more than rustlers and doublecrossers to stop the Montana Whirlwind from acting as Cupid in a romance roundup

TROUBLE, like bananas and grapes, generally comes in bunches and as unexpected as a visit from obnoxious relatives. It appeared one time on a butte just outside Milldew, Montana, rolled up its dukes, breathed on its brass knuckles and strode down into town. It arrived in many guises, one of which was in the person of Wagstaff J. Minch, a too-civilized little character wearing a gray derby hat, a swallowtail coat, a pince-nez, and a bored, benign expression on his long countenance.

He registered at the Milldew Hotel, tidied up a little, then came down and asked the

clerk where he would find a Mrs. Hattie Pringle. In due time he appeared at her office and bowed low.

"Figure I have the pleasure of addressing Mrs. Pringle, huh?" he said.

"That's a matter of opinion, dearie." Hattie sniffed and swung her bootless pedal extremities off the desk. "Pawdon me while I go in the next room and tighten me stays. I know I'll never tighten no cinch too much on a bronc as long as I live again. Take a chair, Bub, and pull yourself together too. You look like you need to. See you in two shakes of a cowbird's tail."

"Odd person," Wagstaff Minch gulped, and let his eyes sweep over Hattie's unique business layout. He flinched when they finally rested on the portrait of "Poison Pete" Pringle, late intrepid sheriff of the county. He was still fascinated by it when Hattie emerged as stately as her two hundred pounds of weight would permit.

"See you are admirin' the pitcher of my old pardner," Hattie beamed. "He was some ringdinger. He sure lived life and enjoyed it at his fullest. Ha!"

"You are surely Mrs. Pringle, aren't you?" Minch asked dubiously.

"She never had no sister, so I must be," the Mother Carey of Milldew retorted. "As the feller said when a sawbones was diggin' a porcupine quill out of his seat, let's hurry up and get to the point. What you sellin'?"

"I am not a common vendor, Madam," Minch said somewhat nettled. "I am giving something away. A hospital. Did I tell you my name was Wagstaff Minch?"

"Wha-a-a-a-at?" Hattie yelped. "They are givin' horsepitals away now? Say! Do you carry a Napoleon hat?"

"I am as sane as you," Minch snorted.

"That wouldn't cut no ice in no courtroom, Minch," Hattie snickered. "But go on as I got nothin' else to do."

"I represent the estate of Nicodemus Z. Pundit, Ma'am. He was a philanthropist."

"Poor man. Was he cured? Of courst not." Hattie sighed. "I had a aunt who was a somrambulist. She rambled in her sleep and one night when Goose Creek was at flood, she—but I hate to think what happened."

MINCH squirmed in his chair and mopped his brow with a big spotted handkerchief.

"Let me continue, please, my dear woman. Nicodemus Pundit had a most horrible start in life and he was only four months old. The poor man was put in a basket and set on the steps of a settlers' shack in the North Dakota wilds. A terrible blizzard swept over the land wolves ran about. The poor li'l feller was found on the steps by the pioneer with his li'l toes froze and just in time to be snatched out from the cruel jaws of a famished wolf. He hovered between life and death. There was no doctors within miles of the isolated cabin. . . . No mother to nurse him."

Wagstaff Minch paused to wipe his fogged pince-nez and blow his bluish nose.

Hattie dabbed at her eyes. "It is almost too much fer me to stand," she sniffed. "Poor li'l feller."

"Well," Minch went on. "He growed up to be a millionaire but he never fergot them days. He wants every li'l sprout in certain places to get what he didn't, ma'am. So he is goin' to endow hospitals where expectant mothers can go until the blessed events. We have chosen Milldew as a good site for one."

Hattie eyed Minch askance. "As the old maid said who crashed a bachelor barbecue, there has to be a catch here somewhere, yep. Why choose a place like Milldew?"

"Or New Eden," Minch said. "Milldew happened to be his first wife's first name. Eden was his favorite daughter, Mrs. Pringle. So here's the conditions as to who gets an endowment."

The door opened violently and lifted Hattie's feet right off the floor. The grey derby took a half-spin on Wagstaff Minch's little pate. A tall lanky cowpoke banged dust off his hat.

"Rustlers are operatin', Ma'am," he howled. "New tricks, dang 'em to blazes! Built a deadfall and caught two T-Bone steers. Just fell into that box canyon by a miracle. Lucky their legs wasn't broke. Me and Absent Tweedy, we saved 'em."

"Get out of here, Ike!" Hattie yelped. "Can't you see we are in confidence? Rustlers, huh! Somebody was just once settin' a trap fer cougars and never filled it in again, is all. Get out of here, you long drink of wormwood or I'll comb your hair with this bust of General Custer. It'll be your last stand."

"All right, if you want to lose all your cussed cows," the foreman said. "Whilst you sit and gab with a silly lookin' dude. You're gittin' old!" He stamped out and slammed the door and a beer calendar from Butte on

the wall jumped its hook.

"Perceed, Mr. Minch," Hattie sighed. "I wish I never got to be a business typhoon."

"Of course, ma'am, we must not play favorites. Naturally we have to be satisfied the community that gets the hospital is makin' progress. That is—how many marriages you had, say the last fifty years? You must have the record. Nicodemus Pundit figured it should be close to a thousand. New Eden has nine hun'red and ninety-six. Ha, ha! After all, there ain't much of a birth rate unless folks get married."

"I figured this was too good to be true like the hombre said who saw a rabbit rubbin' snoots with a bear cub," Hattie orated. "But I'll check with the record and see if we can even start to beat out New Eden. Gobs, it would be nice, havin' a real horsepital fer Milldew with an endowment on it. We would get on the map with a bigger dot, huh? I'll let you know how we stand on splicin's tomorrer, Mr. Munch."

"Minch," the little man muttered. "New Eden was awful nice to me. But like I said, I was to play no favorites and it ain't my money. I bid you good day, ma'am."

"I'll let you know tomorrer how good today was," Hattie said.

"I am in Room Seventy-four, Milldew House," Minch said. "If you wish to see me, ask there."

"I've seen a etchin'." Hattie grinned, and Wagstaff Minch coughed, lost his pince-nez, stooped to pick it up and stepped on a coattail to fall flat on his face. Hattie buried her head in a drawer of her desk and muffled her mirth and withdrew it when she heard the door slam.

"Kind of embarrassed him, huh?" She grinned, looking up at Pete. "Ain't I a ringtailed whizzer!"

Hattie picked up her favorite and only hat, straightened the head of the bird adorning it, shoved a bunch of bogus cherries back into place and sallied forth to look at Milldew's marriage records. She was about to cross the street when she espied Charlie Big Grunt shuffling toward her.

CHARLIE lived far in back of Sugarloaf Mountain and was part Ute, part Shoshone and even had a dab of Sioux in him. He was a forlorn-looking vanishing American and wore an old pair of hair chaps, kept his shirt-tail out and was partial to a battered slouch hat decorated with a dejected looking eagle feather. Charlie always appeared to be bearing the white man's burden along with his own.

"Hello, Charlie," Hattie greeted him. "You look like a massacree goin' somewhere to happen."

"Ugh," the Indian grunted. "Heap feel bad. You talkum too much, Fattum Tub."

"You'll get a kick in your slats in a minute, Oh, Pain-In-The Face."

Hattie sniffed, and walked on. She was about to step up to the sidewalk in front of the drug-store when a wild-eyed little banty legged man caught her by the arm.

"Ma'am!" he yipped. "There is a locoed varmint out by the Creek, rattlin' milksnakes—I mean milkin' rattlesnakes! With my own eyes I seed him."

Hattie Pringle emptied her bellows of air and sat down on the walk. "Stop," she gulped. "First a li'l blue-nosed squirt is givin' horsepitals away. Now some hombre is milkin' sidewinders. This might be April Fool's day, but it ain't. Just take a breath, Ebbie, and start from scratch, huh? Two steers in a deadfall. Milkin' snakes, eh?"

"Yep, he catches 'em and puts 'em in a big basket," the excited citizen said. "Then he picks 'em up and forces them to get rid of their veenom by squeezin' 'em behin' the ears, if they had ears. I asked what he was doin' and he says if you deject the veenom in somebody who was already bit, the feller he bit would live. Hattie, I saw it with me own eyes and I ain't had a snort, honest!"

"Just go away and leave me alone, Ebbie," Hattie said. She got up with difficulty. "I'll try and reason everythin' out. Dice nay, huh? I must see what the marriage record is here."

Hattie was walking into the office of the town clerk when Kip Sometime tugged at her reticule.

"Ma'am, last night a feller tried to steal my best hog. It squealed and woke me up and I run out with the old scatter-gun, but the thief excaped. That hog was shakin' all over an' ain't et since."

"Look, Kip!" Hattie choked out. "I can stand only so much in a day that ain't half over yet. Get away before I forget meself. Oh, bushwash! I got to give a marriage away if the horsepital has a record. That is—let go, Kip, 'fore I hand you your arm."

Her marbles picked up once more, Hattie Pringle consulted the record. To her delight and amazement she discovered that Milldew

boasted of nine hundred and ninety-nine weddings over a fifty-year period.

"That's put New Eden out of the runnin,'" she remarked with gusto. "One romance buddin' now oughter be about ready fer pickin'. Make an even thousand, yep. Aurora Strongtwine and Gibby Sloat. Must look in on 'em and see if I can stir 'em up a bit. Oh - h - h - h, Jenny veeve-swuh-he-e-e-et Jennyveeve—milkin' snakes, huh! They'll be shearin' bobolinks next. I better go and pick out the best spot to build the welcomin' hacienda for new citizens of Milldew. If anythin' was so sure in the bag, I don't know where it is. What is bitin' you, Judge?"

Judge Tolliver, legal light of Milldew, waved a newspaper in Hattie's face.

"A weddin', Hattie. We heard about the horsepital to be give away over in New Eden. See right there! Coffee-Bean. The nuptials of Clementina Coffee and—"

"Oh, stop gripin', you old bagofbones," Hattie sniffed. "We only got one to go and that town is still some off the pace. Of all the pessermists, you're the worst."

"Oh, yep? You look out for that rip who is president of the New Eden Chamber of Commerce, you fat old hairpin. He wouldn't stop at nothin', even if was runnin' right to the edge of a cliff. He's got a crooked political gang who are as bad as any outlaws Pete ever chased. Just because they wear buttoned shoes and derby hats, now, a wolf is a wolf, even if they do put on a sheep's chaps. I'm goin' to oil my old shootin'-iron."

"You couldn't hit a cow in the ribs at five foot away with a handful of buckshot, Judge." Hattie snorted. "Outlaws in New Eden, eh? I think I'll get me some worms and a line and see if I can catch me a shark in Goose Creek!"

"Pretty cocky, huh?" Tolliver blurted out. "What else but a outlaw would try and steal Sad Simms's black trottin' bronc? Only a couple of nights back it was. They did steal it, but that critter broke loose and come runnin' home all lathered up and with a busted rope danglin' from its neck. Sad says he heard some noises, too."

"People are just spooky," Hattie snapped. "Nothin' has been really stole yet. All figgerments of imagination. Out of my way, Judge, as I got important business to attend to."

"Somebody else's, I bet," Tolliver said with a sniff. "Like two folks wantin' to spoon without no tub of taller peekin' over their shoulder."

ABRUPTLY Hattie made a threatening gesture with her warbag and Judge Tolliver back-pedaled into the barber shop and asked for a haircut he had no use for, the most of his pate being as devoid of locks as a turtle's back.

Hattie adjusted her tight corset, hied with utter confidence toward the Strongtwine abode. She soon spotted Aurora hanging wash out on a line. Hattie approached warily.

"Come right over, Mrs. Pringle," Aurora called out.

"Not until I am sure that keg of nitrous glycerine on four legs is tied up," Hattie yelled. "He didn' do my pride no good last time. I couldn't sit down fer a week."

"He's gone, Hattie," Aurora said. "Henry is gone. Somebody stole him last night."

"Huh?" Hattie was surprised. "Then it must have been a pair of gorillas done it," she opined. "You said he was stole? Oh, Gobs! Then somebody really did try and steal two steers, a bronc and a hog. But the posse can wait. What I come here for is more important, dearie. Ha, how is your darlin' Gibby?"

"That no good skinflint, you mean!" Aurora spoke as though she meant it and Hattie knew she did. "That ring he give me was made of glass and balin' wire. He fell asleep listenin' to pa tell about his fights against the Apaches and he snores like he took a buzz saw to sleep with him. And when he was asleep he talked to himself about somebody named Maude. And there is a Maude, a bleached blond trick who works in the Utopia Quick Lunch in New Eden. So when he woke up, I had pa pick him out for good and all. And if you think you can patch this romance up, Hattie Pringle, then you can knit a lace collar with a pitchfork and a pinch-bar. What else you want to see me about?"

"Who—me? Oh, it's about some rattlesnakes that tried to steal a pig and a horse run away and come back home and if that squirt, Minch, runs out of free horsepitals . . . Don't mind me, sister. Just let me count me fingers before I go, is all. Which way is it to the T-Bone ranch? Run by an old fat babe named Hattie Pringle. What am I sayin'? I am her!"

Hattie staggered out of the Strongtwine yard to her Model T, more gaga than she had the day the goat had propelled her out.

Aurora pushed taffy-colored hair out of her eyes and blew a globule of perspiration

off the end of her sharp, freckled nose.

"Ma always said you'd over-do, Mrs. Pringle," she called to Hattie. "Get a mental relapse?"

If Hattie heard, she made no sign. Everything was a blank until she drove into the yard of the T-Bone ranch. A chunky little cowhand in front of the harness shed stretched, let loose with a mighty yawn, then deigned to cross the yard to the flivver and remove his hat.

"What brings you to the T-Bone, ma'am? Ike ain't here. Absent—in body but not mind. Look at the cuss now. Tryin' to yank his head off. Was scratchin' his boots a minute ago. Once Absent pushed his bronc into a cabin, then turned hisself out to graze and put hobbles on his legs. Et a bushel of wild lettuce before he got straightened out. Useless li'l banty."

"Huh?" Hattie mumbled. "Nothin' is useless in this world, nope. The Lord put everythin' here fer a purpose, even me and polecats. Seen any milkshakes lately—I mean milkin' snakes?"

"You been goin' without your hat, boss?" the cowpuncher asked solicitously. "Maybe a snort of somethin'?"

"Just come out to get me bearin's," Hattie sighed. "And to see if old age has really crept up on me. Know of any new romances, Tubby?"

"That old pooch, Bosco, is gettin' kind of partial to a lady Airedale over at the Bar H, ma'am," the fat man said.

"I'll hand you somethin' in a minute, smarty pants," Hattie snorted. "Well, I'm going' to my room and maybe I won't come out for days. You ever think of gettin' yourself a wife, huh?"

"Never got to thinkin' that bad, Hattie. When I get so lonesome I can't stand livin' with myself, I get swacked and get myself some pink elephants and things for company. I had more fun last week playin' around with a spotted beaver that had a elk's head."

"Figger I'll try delirious tremens meself," Hattie said. She eased herself from out behind the wheel and waddled to the T-Bone ranchhouse. "Absent" Tweedy looked up and bade her a pleasant good morning.

"It is close to sunset, beetlehead," Hattie said.

HATTIE PRINGLE did not return to Milldew until late the next afternoon. When she saw what was sitting on the porch of the hotel she wished she had slept through another day out at the T-Bone.

The president of New Eden's Chamber of Commerce was a beetle-browed, tall and angular man with close-set eyes and a face that tapered down to a point. He wore a store suit with his ten-gallon hat and tooled cattlemen's boots. His name was Yelk Burley and had the reputation of having less scruples and no more conscience than a starving wolf in a pen filled with fat sheep.

"If it ain't the big moo cow herself," Burley snapped, baring his big white teeth. "Makin' any love portions lately? Got a newspaper here sayin' another weddin' will take place in New Eden on Wednesday. It's in 'Three Falls Gazette.' Why don't you just give up, Fatty? You sound like you got the heaves."

Hattie felt the last straw putting pressure on her spinal column. She flung her reticule and it caught Yelk Burley in the meridian and drove him, chair and all, through the brittle porch railing at the other end of the veranda. There was a splash, the sound of barrel staves breaking loose from their hoops.

"Anybody else feelin' snippy this bright day?" Hattie ripped out, glowering at three other loungers. "I'm loaded for bear. What? No customers, huh?" She retrieved her reticule, also the newspaper Burley had brought to Milldew. She lifted a timid citizen out of a chair and sat down in it herself, then turned to the society page of the 'Three Falls Gazette.'

Sure enough, there was an announcement of a wedding to take place in New Eden. Hucksberry-Opp. Hattie mentally checked New Eden's fifty-year marriage record. Nine-hundred and ninety-eight was her answer. Even the bird on her old hat seemed to get more decrepit than ever and its head dropped until it buried its beak into the bunch of cherries.

"Two to go. We got one, and this town is as scarce of lovebirds as Tolliver is of legal brains," Hattie sighed.

A bedraggled figure dragged himself up to the porch, dumping water out of a boot. Yelk Burley threatened to sue. He offered to bet Hattie Pringle and all of Milldew a thousand dollars that New Eden would get the hospital Wagstaff Minch was giving away. He backed up his words with a bunch of sodden legal tender which he slapped down at Hattie's feet.

"Cover it, you tinhorn!" he yelped. "Let's see if you dast!"

Hattie Pringle hesitated. She saw two strangers emerge from the barber shop across the street and they appeared to be taking too much interest in what was going on.

She was positive the hombres had never been presented with pins denoting perfect Sunday school attendance. They walked as lightly as cats with sore feet.

"Ya-a-a-ah!" Yelk jeered. "Got the fat babe over a barrel, ain't I?"

"You just been in one, gopher puss!" Hattie roared. "The next time I'll nail you in. A thousan' dollars, huh? I will take that bet. All witnesses testerfy to the fact that I'm callin' this offspring of a half-breed perfumery kitty!"

Yelk Burley strode away, grinning like a hyena straddling a freshly killed gazelle. Water dripped from him as he made his way to the gas buggy with the canvas top, but Hattie Pringle told herself that it was not Burley that was all wet.

"Gettin' me to call his bluff, yep. I can see meself jumpin' off one!"

She sagged deeply in the big armchair and dolefully watched life in Milldew go by. Charlie Big Grunt passed, showing every sign of having imbibed quite freely of firewater.

"Lo, the poor Injun, bushwash!" she groaned. "I am lower than even a mudworm in Goose Creek right now. If they dug down to where my spirits was, they'd find 'em on top of a second-hand hat. Oh, uneasy lies the noggin that is about to be crowned. Huh, goat rustlers, pig rustlers, rattle snake milkers! Sprinkle me with cinnamon and call me an apple cake. Oh-oh! Here comes the committee on runnin' a whizzer on a poor widder woman, and that jackal, Judge Tolliver droolin' for his carrion. They think a body can make lemon pie without some lemons to cut up? Bushwash! Love is scarcer in Mildew right now than chilblains in the Congo!"

"Don't wonder you are talkin' to yourself, you tub of goose grease," Tolliver said. "What are you sittin' around moonin' for, when Milldew is gettin' the watch stole right out of her pocket? Livestock thieves runnin' rampart. A free horsepital goin' to a rival community without even a fight. Only one weddin' needed by the first of the month and it looks like a man better do the thinkin' around here!"

AT THIS insult Hattie turned scarlet. "Ain't legal to knock a male and female over the head with a mallet an' get a preacher to tie the knot while they ain't got their marbles," she yelped. "And maybe you want me to chaste rustlers single-handed all armed to the teeth with a atomizer? Just because a billy goat was snitched that wa'n't worth a scent. Hah!"

"We ain't in no mood for tomfoolery," Judge Tolliver blurted out. "Why don't you admit you lost your punch?"

"Stick out your chin, you scarecrow out on furlough!" Hattie snapped. "Let's see if I have. I'll raise you best two out of three falls even with me lumbago actin' up. You know where a lovin' couple is to be had, go grab 'em quick. I ain't responsible. Er—I ain't kiddin'. I bet a thousan' dollars I'd arrange for the one thousandth weddin'. One leaf of cabbage for each splicin' in Milldew. Who put loco weed in me tea when I wasn't lookin', huh?"

"Ha!" The Judge snickered. "I will pray to live to see the day when you eat crow, Hattie. Even if we lose the hospital I will get a boot out of you handin' Burley that legal tender. She's on the terboggan, feller citizens. Well, let's go and figger out things for ourselves. The o-o-o-o-ld gray ma-a-a-re ain't what she useta be-e-e-e-e—many lo-o-o-ong years ago. Glup—ulp!"

"That was a good shot with a darnin' egg for a old has-been."

Hattie chuckled as four of Milldew's leading citizens straddled the Judge and helped get the obstruction from his skinny throat.

"Tell him to keep his mouth shut." Hattie called out as she walked away. "I got me a can of termaters in me warbag that would just fit it."

Hattie drove away in the flivver and nearly erased one of a race that was fast disappearing. Charlie Big Grunt missed the happy hunting grounds by the width of a soda cracker.

"You a walkin' in your sleep, you heap big dope?" Hattie howled.

"Charlie heap no care shakum hand Manitou right now. Ugh! Life not worthum one leg bullfrog. Ugh! Oogh! Me go jumpem off cliff. Ugh!"

"If you can beat me to it!" Hattie said with a sniff and drove on. "Maybe you better git a reservation for it, ha-a-a-a!"

Charlie Big Grunt's melancholy disturbed Hattie. Ordinarily he was a stoical redskin

who did not care what the next minute brought so long as he did not waste the effort in doing it himself. Charlie Big Grunt had never had a care and had lived the carefree life of a chipmunk. Hattie drove on, and forgot about the Indian. She tried to think of a couple who might get married on the spur of the moment with the right kind of inducement.

"Let's see, who owes me a debt? Nope, that ain't square dealin'. Marriage is a sacred thing, but a pain in me neck for years. Why did I ever get into this?"

Hattie swung the skitterbuggy around and drove to her office. She walked heavily up the stairs and deposited her weary chassis into her big armchair, then looked up at Pete.

"I ain't bothered you much, you old stewpot," Hattie said. "But I wish you'd stir your chains and come to the succor of the woman you left to shift for herself. They got me by the hair with a downhill pull an' for once I don't see no way out. Think of the li'l cusses that are goin' to be born, Pete. Not in a corncrib like you was, or like Nicodemus Pundit in front of a wolf's cruel fangs. Maybe I could get to talk to a spiritist if she had red hair, you old two-timer. Oh, Godfrey! It's no use."

Hattie sighed, took off her shoes, and went to a shelf to get a bottle of Doctor Bunyan's Foot Exhilirator. She happened to spot a dusty book she had intended to read for over a year. One of Pete's library. "Indian Lore & Trails I Have Blazed," by Carson Boone III.

"I'll take it home and read meself to sleep," Hattie mumbled, then returned to her chair.

Hattie was reading the third chapter of Pete's old book. She came to a paragraph that popped her eyes out and lifted her rag hair-curlers straight up. She went over the print the second time, read it aloud.

"The Swampatchees, now an almost extink Injun race, had their own peculiar costumes —custooms—customs. When a brave of this tribe wished the hand of a maid in marriage, he had to present her next of skin—kin—with two fat cows, a horse, one big and one goat, or else he was considered too poor for marriage."

Hattie closed the book with a loud bang and stared open-mouthed up at the ceiling.

"Pete did it again!" she yelped. "He heard me prayer, the old good-for-nothin' darlin'! Why, Charlie Big Grunt is dead ripe for it. Let's see now. It has to be him. Yep. There is only one Injun cutie in this part of the state who ain't too old to get courted. Mary Laughin' Fat! She works in that laundry in Sharpers Flats! Oh, gobs! I got to set the alarm clock for five A.M. Oh-h-h-h-h-h Jennyve-e-e-ve, swuh--heet Jennyveeve! I am saved like a heroine at the end of a movie at the Bijou. Two full-blooded Americans, yep. Might not sound so uppity the Big Grunt-Laughin' Fat nuptials, but it will be a weddin' even if I got to dress up Absent Tweedy like a medicine man. Huh, you never can tell where love lies doormat."

EARLY the next morning, Hattie Pringle drove out to Charlie Big Grunt's cabin behind Sugarloaf mountain. She found Charlie trying to shoot himself with a hastily constructed bow and arrow and grabbed him by the shirt-tail in the nick of time.

"Stop, you goat stealer," she cried. "Why didn't you tell me you was bit by heap big love bug, huh? You got the goat, so all you need is two steers, a horse an' a pig, ugh?"

"Ugh!"

"I have got them for you, Charlie," Hattie said. "Is Mary Laughin' Fat willin' to support you and all that until the Manitoo says you should part?"

"Ugh-ugh! Whatum we waitin' for, ugh? I feel like kissum Big White Mother, ugh!"

"You'll make a noise worst than that if you try," Hattie warned. "Come on. Gittum big carcass in skittumbuggy. I gottum make you and Mary Christians before noontime, at Tepee with Cross. Catch-um?"

"Ugh. Mary Laughin' Fat singum paleface Sunday wigwam!"

"Let's go!" Hattie yelled and pulled Charlie toward the flivver. "We find Mary."

"Her day offum, ugh," Charlie said. "She home in cabin. She do me big washum. Makum big cornbread, much wampum. Ugh!"

Hattie Pringle drove the Model T as fast as it would go with her foot almost through the floorboards. She arrived at the little slab-sided cabin where Mary Laughing Fat lived with her aunt, Annie Limping Beaver.

Mary Laughing Fat was a maid with a big moon face, a non-existent waistline and she wore a beauty preparation concocted out of tallow that failed to remind Hattie of rose petals in a bowl.

She cuddled up against Charlie Big Grunt and said, "Ugh!" Charlie echoed the greeting and Hattie shook her old wise noggin.

"Never saw such romantic love-makin. It pulls at me heartstrings. Charlie, tellum about goodum fortune, huh?"

Charlie Big Grunt let loose with a line of lingo that sounded like a log bouncing down a chute and Mary Laughing Fat's eyes began to widen just as two masked men pushed the door open and took over with forty-five caliber pistols.

One of the Colt muzzles soon found its way between two of Hattie's ribs.

"You just stay put, Fatty," a voice said. "You lift that warbag an inch and you'll be knowin' everythin' sky pilots have been guessin' at for years. Watch the Injun, Fargo."

"A holdup, huh?" Hattie sniffed. "Jimminy, there ain't ten nickels in the whole wikiup. I banked my loose dinero yesterday. What kept you, huh?"

"Ain't money we want, Chubby," the man called Fargo said. " We'll get paid soon as that thousandth weddin' takes place at New Eden tonight. Yuma, get the li'l squaw to cook up some coffee as we'll be here a spell. Nobody never comes by this corner of the portholes. Just make yourself comfortable, yep."

"Yelk Burley's owlhoots!" Hattie roared. "I knowed he wouldn't stop at nothin'. By gobs, I'll fix yuh!"

She tried to reach Fargo with a big fist but the handle of a gun came down smack dab against her most painful corn.

Hattie Pringle then let out a most blood-curdling yell and tried to pick up the injured pedal extremity.

She sat down hard on the floor and her lower plate protruded.

Yuma choked out, "Never seed nothin' s' funny since my grandpa got his beard caught in the wringer whilst he was asleep. Grandma stuffed it into a basket with the wash. Beard was five feet long. He found a sparrow buildin' a nest in it one day."

"There'll come a time when I'll get on your trails, you spawns of Tophet. If I am a hundred and twenty years old I'll find me strength to track you polecats down. Oh-h-h-h-h, me foot!"

"Next time you make a move, I'll shoot the danged toe off," Fargo rasped. "Best cure for corns I know. Rustle up that grub, Butterball. Who said this old fat paleface biddy was poison? It's like takin' peppermint sticks away from a li'l brat. I'm goin' to hate to get paid for this, Yuma."

SHORN of her reticule and her pride, with a little toe that still felt as if little devils were sticking meat skewers into it, Hattie sat hunched up in a corner and listened to her pioneer blood boil. Charlie Big Grunt and Annie Limping Beaver sat Indian fashion near the rusty stove, perplexed by it all. Mary Laughing Fat was putting water in the coffee pot when there was a fumbling at the doorlatch. Yuma jumped up.

"Got the door covered," Fargo yelled. "Yank it open quick."

The door was pulled wide and a familiar figure stood on the old flat rock that served as a step. Hattie's mouth popped open. It was Absent Tweedy. The little banty carried a big lunch basket on his arm. Fargo grabbed Absent by his baggy shirtfront and fairly lifted him into the room.

"Why, what you doin' here?" Absent gulped as he was plunked on the floor on the seat of his pants.

"Gettin' a book out of the library," Hattie snapped. "And when did you learn to read?"

"Huh? Why, I was told to bring lunch to the fellers out on the north pasture. I bet this is nearer the south one, ain't it? I wish I could do things like other hombres, Hattie. I figger I forgot when I stopped in to see a friend on the way. I don't recall now who it was. Gosh! These gents are masked, Hattie."

"No kiddin'? Did you forget it was Hallereen night?"

"Yep, I sure did," Absent said, and set his basket down beside him. "Is Christmas gone yet?"

"Squirrel meat," Yuma grinned, and eyed the basket. "What you got in there, lamebrain?"

"Chicken sandwiches, peanut butter and cheese. Chocklit cake and pickles. Or was it pork sandwiches, potater cakes, and apple pie? I forget."

"The jackpot, Fargo!" Yuma grinned. "Call Jeeps, the butler, and tell him we will eat grub in the Ortchid room. Tell me servant to lay out the iron shirt and tails, huh? To think we get paid, huh? Hand me that basket, pronto!"

"Should I, Hattie?" Absent asked.

"You should, you flathead, unless you want to go where you will forget you're alive and where you'll be right for the first time. Oh, if I could get me hands on a throat!"

Absent handed Yuma the lunch-basket and thanked Yuma politely.

"I wish it was more, but—what am I sayin', Hattie?"

Yuma smacked the basket down on the table and Fargo kept his forty-five sweeping in a short semi-circle.

Yuma lifted the cover of the basket and shoved in a greedy hand.

"I wish a big diamon' back would bite you, you misbegot offspring of a wolf," Hattie snapped.

She paused, wondering at the expression which had come to Yuma's face and frozen there. Yuma's hat lifted right off his head and he suddenly let out a choking yelp of pain and stark terror. He jerked his hand free and held it up in front of his bugging eyes. Over the rim of the lunch-basket slid the wedge-shaped head of a reptile. There was a sound like dry corn being shaken up in a dice-box.

"It bit me, Fargo!" Yuma screeched. "I'm goin' to die in a horrible way."

"Heap big rattler!" Charlie Big Grunt howled.

"Two of 'em!" Absent Tweedy nasaled. "An' still another! Why, it's filled with snakes!"

Fargo's legs were planted against the floor and he seemed to turn to stone as he stared at Yuma. Hattie Pringle reached quickly for a stove poker and hurled it at Fargo's shins. The bandit howled to high heaven and fired while off balance. The bullet clipped Charlie Gig Grunt's feather off. Charlie let loose the long forgotten Swampatchee warhoop, pulled a knife as long as an Eskimo winter from his belt and leaped at Fargo.

"You know what, Hattie?" Absent Tweedy yelled above the din. "I forgot again. I remember who I stopped in to see. That snake milker. I set my baskit down, and must of picked up the wrong one. Yep, this is all my fault."

Hattie got Charlie Big Grunt around the waist and pulled desperately to prevent a scalping from taking place in the township. Yuma was sitting in a corner sweating ice-cold dew and waiting for the bony hombre carrying the scythe.

"Shoot me, somebody, to save me from untold agony," he bellowed. "I am sorry for my sins."

"I wish I didn't cause so much trouble for people," Absent continued to gripe. "The time I put snuff on cinnamon buns instead of nutmeg while I was cook at the rancho."

HATTIE PRINGLE made very sure that Fargo was rendered horse de combat by tapping him over the pate with a stove-lid.

"Sit on him, Mary Laughin' Fat, an' you too, Annie Limpin' Beaver. Even a elephant would be helpless with you two holdin' it down. Where are you, Absent, huh?"

"I am fired, huh?" Absent Tweedy asked mournfully.

"Wha-a-a-at?" Hattie gulped. She reached for the little cowboy, drew him to her bosom and kissed him on the forehead. Absent's eyes rolled.

"Why, I never knowed you cared, ma'am. I fergit so easy. When did we get engaged to marry, huh?"

"Why, you li'l fresh half-pint!" Hattie said and placed Absent near the woodbox with the flat of her hand. Then she went over where Yuma was thinking up a prayer and stood over him, arms akimbo.

"Don't worry. You ain't fit t' die, you crook. Them rattlers are milked. The poison was took out of their fangs, Yuma. Didn't you hear we had a rattlesnake milker?"

Yuma stared up at Hattie and his lower jaw snapped up into place. He suddenly tried to pick up a Colt that was near at hand and Hattie came down on his fingers with both feet. At the same time her fists thudded like two pile drivers atop Yuma's bony noggin and nearly closed him up like a jackknife. Charlie Big Grunt grinned.

"Ugh, you swingum like Jack Dempsey. Big stuff. Now me and Mary Laughin' Fat take trail together. Ow-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah!"

"Which reminds me we got to work fast," Hattie shouted. "Tie these critters up tight, Charlie. Figger they will give testermony that will throw Yelk Burley in the hoosgow for about ten years for attempted kidnapin' and collision—or contusion. Which it is, don't matter. Milldew's one thousandth weddin' must take place not later than high noon. Why—er—there is somebody at the door. Let me open it as I have a hunch bigger than any camel in Africa. Hand me that stick of firewood, Annie."

A man opened the door cautiously, stuck his head inside.

Whacko!

Yelk Burley pitched forward on his face.

"Timber-r-r-r!" Hattie cried out. "Tie him up with his hired cutthroats, Charlie. Absent, remind me to give you a raise tomor-

rer. And stop holdin' your left ear. It was your right one I pasted."

"Yep, it was, wasn't it?" The absent-minded banty grinned sheepishly. "I wonder how long it takes rattlers to get their teeth filled with veenom after bein' milked?"

"Let's get out of here," Hattie screeched. "One just crawled into my reticule. They won't get lonesome with three relatives in the house with 'em."

Milldew's citizens stopped what they were doing when the Model T containing Hattie Pringle, Charlie Big Grunt, Absent Tweedy and Mary Laughing Fat, drew up in front of the Milldew House. Judge Tolliver paused in the midst of a harangue against Hattie and balanced an unspoken word of censure on his tongue.

Hattie got out of the flivver and thrust her jaw out.

"Stir your stumps, you drones. Get the law out to Mary Laughin' Fat's cabin and pick up three owlhooters. Go get a parson and tell him to hop over to the Church for a weddin'. Two real Americans, more'n any of us. Charlie Big Grunt is takin' heap big weddin' vows with Mary Laughin' Fat, ugh! Where's Wagstaff Minch? Go get him, too. Why, what's the matter, Judge? You swaller a big furry caterpiller?"

"Injuns," Judge Tolliver gulped. "Who'd think of that but her, huh? I give up. Yep! Milldew gets the horsepital and Hattie has come through again. Oh, I hate meself sometimes."

"Skip it." Hattie grinned, and eased her tired torso to the steps of the Milldew House. "That Pete! Never was a man like him, friends. Dead or alive, he sticks his snoot in. I figger I'll read about the weddin' in tomorrer's Clarion. I'm goin' home and meself to bed, even if it is only noontime. I'm gettin' old."

Hattie drove home, took off her taffeta and other impedimenta and crawled into bed.

"I'm through fer keeps, by Godfrey," she said. "Never will I stick me chin out no more."

She closed her eyes, opened them a little later and said to herself.

"You know you are only kiddin', Hattie, you old sucker!"

Coming Next Issue: HATTIE PRINGLE in FLAPJACKS OF HEARTS

Big Tim's Daughter

By MARIAN O'HEARN

The accusation that her father is guilty of corruption brings worry and heartbreak to lovely young Gail Thurston—and acts as a barrier between her and the man whom she loves!

CHAPTER I

Politician's Daughter

AS GAIL walked down the main street of Tarryall, she was pleasantly aware of the hard sunlight and the thin, dry air which gave buoyancy to the day. But she was also conscious of the guarded look on the face of every person who passed. Both men and women were careful to say: "Afternoon, Miss Thurston," but their voices were stiff and their eyes cold.

She made her own greetings casually friendly, but the feeling of aliveness was gone, crushed against the wall of hostility which Tarryall had erected around her father and herself.

The range resented "Big Tim" Thurston who had come here from Denver nine years before, to make his home. The people might have accepted him in time if he had not retained his political connections with Denver and Washington or if his wealth, combined with hard-fisted determination, had not reached out over all of the range.

Resentment had spread to Gail because she was his daughter and her life was often sparse with loneliness. Except for the occasions when she filled the Flying S ranch house with friends from the East, her only companionship came from Big Tim. Neighbors made brief duty calls when she and her father were at the Flying S, but when they were living in town, as they did for months of each year, their only visitors came for political or business reasons.

A group of women moved aside to let her pass and a half dozen children, arms linked, rushed down the sidewalk. They brushed heavily against her but did not pause and Gail glanced after them, realizing that mannerless children seemed to fill the streets of Tarryall.

"Forget this town and the people in it," she told herself. "Gard Jackson will be here tonight. And as soon as I finish shopping I'll go back to the hotel and dress. Really dress."

Gard Jackson! Just thinking of his name brought a lift for the memory of him was like recalling a first waltz under the stars. Or a first kiss.

Six months ago Gail had accompanied her father to a political meeting in Denver and Gard had been at the ball which climaxed the conference. The Governor had introduced him.

"Jackson's going to be my man Friday," the Governor had told her with a smile. "Guess he plans on learning the ropes so that he'll be ready to take my job later on."

It had been early Spring and they had gone out into the little garden behind the hotel. The music pursued them and Jackson had said: "This is a good place to dance, too."

So, they had danced in the light of the fiercely glowing stars and when the music had stopped, he kissed her. It had been an intended part of the moment, or maybe an intended part of her life, so right and natural that neither of them realized that they had known each other only a few minutes.

As Gail halted her pony and dismounted, Farmer came out of the ranchhouse, his grave eyes fixed inquiringly upon her pretty flushed features

SINCE then she had seen him many times, for he made frequent trips between the Governor's office and Big Tim's domain in Tarryall. If he remained a whole week, this time as he hoped, they would go out to the ranch where she could be herself and not merely "Big Tim's" daughter.

Gail halted again as a small boy darted from a doorway and ran, shrieking, for the street.

After him pelted another boy and a little girl howling with rage.

"I'll get you," the girl shrieked. "I'll fix you!"

The fugitive, whirling to avoid a carriage, stumbled, and the other two children immediately fell upon him. He writhed frantically, but they pinned him to the earth and the little girl, kneeling astride his body, pummeled him fiercely.

Gail, frowning at the uneven struggle, waited for someone to intervene, but the nearby adults remained unconcerned. She strode across the sidewalk.

"Aren't you ashamed?" she demanded, pulling the two children from their victim. "Besides," accusingly, "girls don't do that. It's not fair to hit boys, because they can't hit back."

"He stole my jacks and—girls can too fight!"

A man chuckled and Gail glanced up into amused brown eyes.

"I was starting for them," the man said. "But you beat me to it."

She did not answer at once, for her glance seemed caught and held. His eyes were the deepest brown she had ever seen and his hair was almost the same shade. He had an attractive crooked smile and faint sprays of lines, which had been made by laughter, about his mouth.

"No one else seemed to mind," she explained, releasing the children. "Sometimes I wonder if the kids in Tarryall ever heard of rules or manners. They never go to school, either."

His crooked mouth smiled. "There's not a decent school in the county and no one bothers about what the kids are doing."

"No schools?" She stepped back onto the wooden sidewalk and discovered that she was only a little shorter than he. His faded range clothes were dusty as if after a hard ride and there was an odd quietness about him. The disturbing quietness of assurance or strength. "But there are. There must be!"

"How long have you lived in this district?" he demanded.

"Nine years."

His glance flicked over her and she saw new deeps beyond the depths of his eyes. "You haven't been out of school so long you can't remember what it was like."

"I went East to school."

"Maybe you're not interested in the range schools."

"But I am. I wish you'd tell me about them."

His eyes changed and shadows covered their depths.

"How about going to the cafe for some lunch? We can talk better there."

She nodded and realized that she felt completely at ease, as if she had always known him. Yes, that was what she had felt—what had seemed like a greeting in his eyes, the sense of having known him a long time ago.

They turned toward the little cafe. "My name's Earl Farmer, ma'am," he said. "I've a spread, the Falling T, in South Park."

Her lips parted, but for the space of a breath she held back her words and finally spoke almost fumblingly.

"I'm Gail—Thurston," she said, and realized she had let her voice fall so abruptly over the last name that it was only a vague sound.

She flushed and glanced at him, wondering why she wanted to conceal her name from this stranger. Irritation, like hundreds of pinpoints prickled over her and she asked herself if she was ashamed to have him know the fact that she was "Big Tim's" daughter.

But instead of explaining, Gail went quickly in the cafe, ahead of him, moving so lightly that her tall, slim body seemed assured as that of a dancer. And that assurance made her worn riding clothes seem entirely right, gave a stamp of completion to all of her. Bareheaded, as usual, her fair hair was sun bleached until it held silvery lights and her skin and mouth were fine. But her eyes were surprising, for they were green as dark jade and set between sooty lashes.

A waitress led them to a corner table and when they were seated Earl Farmer grinned at her.

"It begins to seem silly to talk about schools," he murmured. "You remind me of a kid who's waiting for a lesson, hands folded and attention all ready."

HIS low voice carried a new warmth and once more she felt that somewhere, sometime, in a forgotten past, she had talked with him.

"The term 'kid' hardly fits me. I'm almost as tall as you."

"What's that got to do with it. You have a child's face. Life hasn't yet touched it, or you."

She smiled and her mouth took on a swift vividness, a new depth of color.

"Maybe you mean I'm 'emotionally unawakened'."

"Yeah." His eyelids moved together and the faint laughter lines deepened. "That's about it."

The curve of Gail's lips sharpened and her green eyes changed as she remembered. "Unawakened." Maybe he wanted to think that, but there had been the night under the stars with Gard. A night when life itself had tumbled into her hands and then bound them to make her captive.

"Still, I'd like to hear about our schools."

His glance went past her as he spoke. "I began to get interested in them a couple of months ago when some neighbors stopped sending their kids to the district school because rain came through the roof, there wasn't enough heat in winter and not even the right text books."

"But why? There's enough money in this country to provide first class schools."

Farmer grinned again, but now it made his face look dark.

"Probably for the same reason we haven't a decent public building or a jail fit to hold criminals," he said.

"This is a rich district and the tax rate is high!" she cried.

"Yeah, but we have more grafting politicians than any other community in this state and not even one percent of the taxes are spent on schools or public improvements."

"If that's true, I still want to know why." Gail was puzzled. "What's the reason the people keep dishonest politicians in office? They could get rid of them."

Earl Farmer laughed. "Yeah, so it'd seem. But we have a big time political boss, one with more power than he needs for a place like this. Most of the people here owe money to Big Tim Thurston in one way or another and he's got everything sewed up. His pals in Denver and Washington work with him and this county is something he carries in his pocket."

Gail's vivid lips lost some of their rich softness and her darkly green eyes looked levelly into his.

"I'm afraid you didn't understand when I told you my name," she said.

"Gail!"

The word came from behind her, spoken in a voice which was sudden excitement in her veins. It was the call of life itself.

She whirled around.

"Gard!" she exclaimed. "But I didn't expect you for hours. Not until tonight."

Gard Jackson's smile was real. And he was actually here, almost touching her.

Her glance ran over him, seeing his tallness, the fair hair which was a small boy's crop of ringlets no matter how ruthlessly he had them sheared. He wore his "city clothes" so casually that they did not set him apart from the men around him, or spoil his air of easy, masculine grace.

"Got away earlier than I expected. Which means I'll have that much more time here."

As he spoke his blue eyes said that she was lovely. That look reminded her of the night under the stars when they had known their meeting to be fated.

She gave him both her hands and glanced at Earl Farmer.

"This is Gard Jackson, from Denver." Her eyes returned to Jackson. "Earl has the Falling T ranch in South Park."

Farmer's mouth straightened and he nodded without offering his hand.

"I've heard of you. Friend of Tim Thurston's, aren't you?"

Gard's glance flicked to Gail and the blood which swept into her cheeks was liquid fire.

"You didn't hear all of my name," she said, slowly and distinctly. "I'm Gail Thurston, Big Tim's daughter."

Earl Farmer's mouth did not change but became even more crooked, twisting over his words as he spoke.

"I see. Sorry I started the political lecture."

"I'm not, and I am glad I met you." She smiled at him, because he was no longer disturbing, no longer touched her senses with warmth. "And I hope you'll soon tell me about the schools."

"I don't expect to be in town for some time."

"But I'll be at the Flying S. We're going out there tomorrow morning to stay for a couple of weeks."

"Thanks, ma'am."

Gard's hand closed on Gail's arm.

"Your father's waiting for me," he said, his voice expressing nothing beyond the words he spoke.

She started out of the restaurant at once, conscious only of the fact that Gard Jackson was with her.

CHAPTER II

Earl Farmer's Dream Girl

WHILE Gail and Gard Jackson walked back to the hotel, the sunlight, instead of blotting out the memory or the mood of that long ago night under the stars, seemed to give it new life.

Gard's hand was still on her arm and the flesh beneath his touch was responsive as a pulse-beat.

"What was that hombre, Farmer, talking about?" he asked.

"We were discussing the schools," she answered.

"Oh," he chuckled. "You mean politics. Well, he looks as if he could throw his weight around if he wanted to. Tough. Didn't you feel that?"

"Tough?" She hadn't thought of the word in connection with Farmer and now, it brought a sudden, clear picture of him into her mind. The depths of his dark eyes, the sensitiveness of his mouth with its crooked smile.

"I don't know him. This is the first time I ever saw him. But Gard, why are the schools in such bad shape?"

"Here's the hotel." His hand tightened, briefly on her arm. "Your father's probably fuming. I left word at the desk after they told me you were out and went to look for you. Going upstairs?"

Gail's narrow dark brows moved together, for Gard's face had changed. It had become a bland, unreadable mask. And even his eyes were guarded.

"He doesn't intend to discuss the county schools with me," Gail said to herself. "He's determined not to. Maybe he considers it outside his province as aide to the Governor. Or—or maybe he's already becoming the hardened kind of politician!"

On the second floor, which was occupied by herself, her father, his secretaries and servants, Gard left her outside "Big Tim's" office and she crossed the living room to her bedroom. As she entered it, she halted sharply, remembering a man's low, swift words, as vividly as if she were hearing his voice.

"We have a big time political boss here—one with more power than he needs."

This room, itself, was a symbol of her father's power and wealth. Big, sunny, softly colored, it was intended as a lovely setting for his only child. Now Gail was looking at it with suddenly sharpened eyes.

She thought: When he knew who I was, everything about him changed, as if being my father's daughter made me different!

She walked to the full length mirror on the farther wall and regarded her reflection critically, trying to see how she must have looked to the hard-lipped stranger. But the glass gave back only a picture of silvery-fair, rumpled hair, puzzled green eyes and a slimly curved body dressed in old, worn riding clothes. Not much different than she always looked—to herself.

Impatiently, she hurried into the bathroom, bathed and returned to the bedroom to dress. Her frock was green, in a shade to match her jade-colored eyes and it was made to show all the fine balance of her body. A restaurant dress which covered shoulders and arms even while suggesting every contour and line.

Earl Farmer had seen her in disreputable riding clothes.

"But I'm dressing for Gard," she reminded herself.

"Gail!" her father bellowed from the hall. "I'm hungry. We've been waiting for hours."

She pulled on a tiny black hat which dipped an inky ostrich feather over one eye and picked up her bag and gloves.

Gard's blue glance deepened when she appeared.

"It's worth the waiting, at least," her father said. "First time in days I've seen you in anything but pants."

He beamed at her and once more she was conscious of his fierce, protecting love. Tim Thurston was as big as his name implied with massive shoulders and a powerful body. A large, well-made head, a mane of white hair and keen young eyes under thick gray brows.

She entered the dining room with her arm through his and the headwaiter rushed to receive them. Two other waiters hurtled themselves forward to stand at Thurston's special table and they were seated with the usual ceremony.

Everyone in the room looked at them de-

liberately, expressionlessly, staring first at Big Tim, then at Gard and finally at Gail, as if she might be the answer to the two men.

Thurston ordered quickly, imperiously, and Gard smiled at the girl.

"The manager told me there's to be dancing after dinner," he said. "Seems they plan to have dancing once a week. Going to use the dining room for a ballroom."

SHE laughed. "That sounds like a good idea. I haven't danced in so long."

"We'll get in enough dancing tonight to make up for all we've missed," Gard said, and his eyes were reminding her of many things, particularly of another night when they had danced alone, under stars.

"So that's your plan," Tim Thurston broke in. "I thought you were here to see me."

"I can see you tomorrow," Jackson said calmly. "But maybe I won't be able to dance with Gail tomorrow."

"Dad, that reminds me. I'd like to go to the ranch. We'll take Gard out with us tomorrow and his visit will be much nicer there than here in town."

"All right with me," Big Tim rumbled. "Send word to the housekeeper to get things ready."

"I did, hours ago. And—"

A man stopped at their table and Big Tim's face chilled.

"Evening, Calhoun."

"Good evening, good evening." The man's voice was hearty and it did not seem to fit his tall, spare body. His smile was broad but his eyes were anxious.

"Gail, this is Jeff Calhoun, vice president of the Farmers National Bank," Big Tim said, almost wearily. "You know Jackson, of course, Jeff."

Calhoun beamed and pulled a chair up to the table.

"Some interesting news running through town," he told Thurston. "Seems as if somebody's going to start an independent party—reform idea."

Big Tim cocked a shaggy brow. "Who's their man? Or haven't they got one yet?"

Jeff Calhoun's nervous smile flickered. "Yes. Hombre named Farmer who owns the Flying T. He's young and a fighter, so they probably thinks that's enough."

Thurston's glance moved across the room.

"Sometimes it is," he said, softly, as if to himself. "Sometimes it is. I'll find out about him, but now I'm going upstairs. Got enough work to keep me busy all night. Coming, Gail?"

"No. Don't you remember—we're dancing."

"Then I'll see you later. Good night, Jeff."

The banker also left.

"At least, I'll have a few minutes alone with you," Gard said. "Shall we stay here until the dancing starts or do you want to do something else? How about a walk?"

"Yes, I think that's a good idea."

The waiters sprang forward again, ushering them solicitously away from the table, but at the doorway Gail stopped as sharply as if a hand were barring her way.

Earl Farmer was entering the dining room. Once more she was disturbed and almost troubled, sure that once before she had known him. The lean, dark vital face stood out sharply against the faces around him and every glance hurried toward him, as if in response to a command.

"Farmer again," Gard murmured. "Wonder if he's as tough as he looks."

Gail was still watching Earl.

"I think he is," she said.

"Might be worth knowing."

With Farmer was a girl, a slight, dark girl, dressed in smart simple blue. As she saw Gard, her eyes opened a little and her swift smile was soft.

"Hello," she cried and turned away from Farmer to hold out her hand.

"This is Esta Humphries," Jackson said. "But you probably know each other."

The dark girl nodded and smiled at Gail, but her eyes did not actually leave Gard. And Gail looked at Earl Farmer. He nodded unsmilingly, his face masked against her.

"This is the way you really look," he said softly. "The way you ought to look, of course."

"Is it so different?"

"More in character. Tonight you're really Gail Thurston and," he paused before he finished in flat tones, "the most beautiful girl in Colorado."

Her cheeks stung, but she smiled and then Gard claimed her, hurrying her out through the lobby to the street.

They walked slowly, for the night was soft and a young moon gave it a thin veil of moonlight, through which a few stars poked their harder brilliance.

"I've thought of a night like this, and being with you," Jackson said. "Somehow, there's never been another night quite like the one

when we first met. Something's always getting in our way, pushing in between us, Gail. It's got to stop."

HIS shoulder brushed against her arm, sending a tingle through her, and she took his arm. She would stop thinking of Earl Farmer, of his low, harsh voice talking about Big Tim, and telling her she was now what Big Tim's daughter should be.

"Who's Esta Humphries?" she asked.

"Who?" Gard looked at her curiously. "That's about all I know. Met her last time I came up here. I think her father runs the feed store and she helps him sometimes."

Esta was lovely and alive. As vital as Farmer. Perhaps they had known each other a long time and were in love.

"Let's go back," Gail said, and turned without waiting for his reply.

When they reached the hotel dining room again, the orchestra was playing and a dozen couples were already dancing.

"The ball's started and with a waltz, too," Gard said. "Remember our last waltz, Gail?"

She went into his arms, remembering. The uncomfortable sense of disturbance left her. She moved a little closer to Gard and his arms tightened so that his touch sent threads of fire through her flesh.

"It's 'Linda Mia'," she murmured. "What was the name of the waltz in Denver?"

"You've forgotten! I still remember every word and every note of it. It was called 'I'll Bring You a Rose,' Gail," he added abruptly. "Let's get out of here. I'll get a carriage and we'll go for a drive."

Her lips parted, swiftly—and then she saw Earl Farmer. He was dancing with Esta Humphries and, over the dark girl's head, his eyes met hers. He smiled and there was no crooked twist to his mouth now. Perhaps that was because of his partner, of Esta.

"No, not yet," she told Gard. "I want to dance."

After that she watched Farmer, almost against her will, noticing how easily he moved. An air of determination was evident in the expression of his dark face. Even in the lines of his body she could discern the same unceasing purpose.

"Linda Mia" ended. But as they started from the floor, the orchestra immediately swept into "Caravan". Gard turned to her, but as his arms opened, both of them became aware of Farmer. He was standing beside them and somehow, to Gail, his advent was as disturbing as a dark, threatening flame.

"I was hoping you'd give me this dance," he said, ignoring Jackson.

"Why—of course." Her glance seemed lost in his eyes, as if the strange, far depths had imprisoned it.

She was not sure when he took her into his arms or when they started to dance, but a little later, she realized that the music was flowing around them and they were moving in time to it. He had not spoken and once more the faint twist was on his lips, deepening the lines at their corners.

"Still interested in schools?" he asked, finally.

"Yes. And I still hope you'll tell me what's wrong with them."

"I'm ready to tell you now. There's a writing room next door and we can talk there."

They danced to the entrance, slipped into the lobby and around to the small, dimly illuminated writing room. Farmer opened another window and pulled out a chair. But when he spoke his voice had changed into harsh abruptness.

"I suppose you know I didn't want to come here to talk about schools, but about you."

Her slim body grew still and something like alarm raced along her nerves. But her sooty lashes flickered against her fair skin, as her eyes opened to surprise.

"That ought to be very easy," she said. "I'm Big Tim Thurston's daughter. Doesn't that answer everything."

"Maybe." He was sitting opposite her, leaning forward, and there was anger in his face. She was sure of that. An impatient anger.

Her glance dropped, swiftly, and rested on his hands, which were closely knit and strong looking. They were so restless and vital. She stirred almost nervously.

"You're not sure," she demanded.

"No. I couldn't be sure about you." He swung to his feet and walked to the end of the room. Coming back, he sat down again and brought out cigarette makings. Without asking permission, he rolled a smoke and struck a match.

WHY had he brought her here? Merely for this? Did he know that being alone with him in the small, dim room would arouse conflict within her almost as if she were struggling against him? Against the force of his hard, determined vitality?

"I'm going to tell you the truth," he said. "Maybe that'll get rid of the whole thing—

for me. There's nothing for you to get rid of. When I met you today, I didn't know who you were, but I thought you were someone else, someone I'd been trying to find all my life."

"Someone you'd been trying to find?"

"Yeah." He grinned and the crooked line of his mouth was savage. "The one woman. I always thought I'd know her as soon as I saw her. And I did. I decided, then: 'Here she is and heaven help us both'."

Her lips opened and then settled together again, their richness gone. The sound of muffled, painful drumming was in her ears. She knew it to be the quickened beating of her heart.

"Then you learned I was Gail Thurston." She said, "What did that mean to you?"

"A lot. Tim Thurston spells power, money and—corruption. His daughter is part of all those things."

"Thanks."

He got up and bent over her. And as he spoke his breath touched her face.

"I won't remember you as you are tonight," he said. "I'll remember you as the girl I met today."

He kissed her and his lips held hers until the muffled thudding spread through all of her body and pounded into her brain.

He had done this deliberately! Almost hating her because of his hatred for her father, he had brought her here to make love to her, to hold her in his arms after saying he did not want to remember.

But, as his kiss ended and his lips left hers, her hands lifted to his face and brought his lips back in a caress she remembered afterwards with troubled surprise. His arms tightened in a swift, almost savage, gesture. Then he released her.

"Yeah," he murmured. "You knew I'd kiss you—and you wanted me to. The girl I met today wasn't like that."

The color spilling into Gail's cheek was fire against her skin, but she made herself smile.

"Then I fit your idea of what Tim Thurston's daughter has to be." He did not answer and her smile widened. "That takes care of everything, doesn't it? Good night."

"Please wait!" he cried, leaping forward to grasp her arm.

There was an excited light in his eyes, as if he had made some strange discovery. But Gail shook off his arm.

"I said good night," she said in an austere voice that stopped him suddenly.

CHAPTER III

Lost Spark

GAIL walked unhurriedly out into the lobby. She did not pause until she reached the dining room which was now crowded and noisy. Esta Humphries, dancing with Gard Jackson, was looking at him with lighted eyes.

Gail thought, why she's in love with him!

Quickly Gail's glance searched Gard's face, but he was regarding Esta with a mixture of amusement and indulgence which flicked at the new, raw hurt in her mind. Earl Farmer hadn't shown even that much liking but had looked at her almost angrily even while he kissed her!

She turned back, but before she could reach the stairs, Gard called out.

"Gail! Where are you going?"

"I'm tired and I want to start for the ranch early in the morning."

As he reached her, he took her arm and drew her close to him.

"Anything happened? I thought this was to be our night."

"Our night!"

She said the words silently, and felt all of her warmth for him deepen. Of course, it was Gard who mattered tonight and all the rest of the time. The scene with Earl Farmer had been unimportant, almost humorous, now that she was away from him.

"I'll go back and we'll dance some more," she said.

"No, let's both go upstairs."

The big, high ceilinged living room was lighted just enough and Gard drew her down to the couch, into his arms.

"I've been trying to figure it out," he said. "Something's gone wrong. It's not the way I thought or hoped it'd be."

She stiffened, under his hands. For part of a second, she wanted to escape from him, for she seemed to hear an echo of Earl Farmer's voice behind his. And the echo was saying: "You were someone I'd been trying to find all my life."

"Gail!"

She turned to him quickly.

"You're being imaginative," she said, her words swift and light. "There's nothing wrong between us. There couldn't be."

She yielded to his arms then and as his kiss claimed her, she thought, this is the way it was intended to be. Gard and I. The first time I saw him I knew.

It was many minutes afterward, although time had become expanded and slow moving to Gail, with Gard's arms around her, that she sat up and turned to look toward the door.

She felt Gard stiffen, too, and saw her father standing on the threshold. With him was Earl Farmer.

Tim Thurston was eyeing her disapprovingly and his voice was gruff when he finally spoke.

"Sorry to break in like this, but there's something I want to see you about, Jackson," he boomed. "Will you excuse him, Gail?"

Gard walked stiffly, automatically to the door, while she sat rigidly erect on the couch. Earl Farmer nodded, and followed her father and Jackson down the hall. . . .

By afternoon of the following day, Gail, her father and Gard Jackson had settled into the Flying S ranch house as though they had always lived there.

Mrs. Lowe, the house-keeper, and the two maids were handling the situation with smooth efficiency.

"And it's as dull as town," Gail told herself, and once more paced the length of the living room, wondering how much longer her father would hold Gard, who had promised to go riding.

Finally, she caught up the tan Stetson which went with her brown and tan riding outfit and went across the hall to her father's office. She opened the door without knocking.

"I'm going to ride now," she said. "If Gard's still tied up, then I'll go alone."

"He'll be through in another hour, honey," Tim Thurston said.

"I'd better be," Jackson said. "Or your father's going to be left flat."

"I'm not waiting any longer. See you when I get back."

"Hold on," Thurston called. "Two days from now, we're giving a party here, a dance in Gard's honor. I want the people of the district to get acquainted with him. So you'd better go into conference with the housekeeper, Gail, and see that everything's right. Needn't bother about the invitations, though. I'll have my secretary take care of them."

"A party? Impossible! Not with our neighbors."

HER father shrugged. "Oh, they'll come," he said indifferently. "And just now I want them to. This fellow Farmer might really throw us off at the next election. He's got a lot of what it takes. Came to see me last night, to tell me about the Colorado Citizens' Party that's being formed. He said he wanted me to know, right from the start, that they were going to fight me." Thurston's smile turned into a chuckle. "He's capable of it, too. So we'll play safe by offering Jackson to the range. Jackson ought to give Farmer some competition after I get him away from the Governor."

Gail's glance caught Jackson's and once more she felt that strange sense of pausing—or of ending. Gard's eyes betrayed nothing but agreement, even satisfaction, concerning her father's plan, and she wondered if he would always obey Big Tim's orders.

"I'll talk to Mrs. Lowe," she said, and closed the door quickly behind her.

The wrangler had saddled her pony long before and in the saddle, she rode through the lane to the range, thinking of Gard and her father. Tim Thurston usually dominated everyone around him, but until now she had not realized that he also dominated Gard Jackson.

"Big Tim has more power than he needs for a place like this," Earl Farmer had said.

She turned her pony abruptly. She prodded him into a canter and entered the main wagon road a mile below the Flying S. Traveling south to the forks, she turned east and, ten minutes later, had her first view of the local county school. It was a low, squat building which had once been red but was now a dirty, faded brown. Built in a depression between land swells it was surrounded by mud and the only playground was a stretch of wet, trash-covered clay.

Gail got down before the sagging hitchrack and picked her way to the door. There was no answer to her knock and she opened the door into a dim, gray twilight through which she could see the schoolroom only hazily. At the far end, a woman or girl was seated at a desk facing less than a dozen pupils who were now turning around to stare at Gail.

The teacher left the desk, but it was only when she was half way down the center aisle that Gail realized it was Esta Humphries.

"I'm sorry I've interrupted you. But—I didn't know you were the teacher."

"Just temporarily. Earl Farmer asked me to take over when the last teacher quit a couple of weeks ago. The school board's trying to find some one, but it's not easy to get teachers for this place at the salary they offer."

"This isn't pleasant," Gail agreed and her glance ran around the dingy, dark room.

Esta's face grew inscrutable and she waited in a silence so pointed that Gail grew quite uneasy.

"I won't stay any longer," Gail said. "I just wanted to know—what it was like."

"And now you've found out." Esta Humphries' voice was crisp. "Come again, Miss Thurston."

Gail hurried out. As she stepped into the saddle, she heard the roll of fast approaching hoofs. Glancing down the road, she saw Gard on a big, sleek black.

She called to him.

"I've been looking for you," he said, pulling to a stop outside the school grounds. "Couple of riders said they'd seen you heading this way."

She rode on, holding her mount to a walk. "Who are the members of the school board in this county?"

He turned his head, sharply, and as their eyes met, his were unreadable.

"I don't know. We'll ask your father."

"I intend to. That building isn't fit for an animal, much less a child."

"Gail." He leaned over and, catching her pony's cheek strap, brought him to a halt. "Be smart and forget about it. Don't mix up in local politics because that'll just make things messy for your father. He's running the show here. Everybody takes orders from him."

Her green eyes darkened and looked, with new steadiness, into his.

"That's what I wanted to know."

Jackson's eyes lost their wariness.

"I like you when you try to be serious," he said. "It does things for you. But this is the first chance I've had to be with you and I'm going to make the most of it. Gail, honey, come over where you belong."

JACKSON put his hands on her slim waist and lifted her from the saddle into his arms.

"Sort of public, but there's no one around, at least," he said. "Why don't you try to smile?"

Her lips remained straight. "I can't just skip over it like that. I wish you'd look at that school. It's ghastly."

"Not now," he murmured. "I have something better to do."

He kissed her, slowly, and her soot-dark lashes drooped together. Her blood stirred and sent warmth into her lips. And shocked distaste which the little schoolhouse had aroused, dimmed until she was once more in her own world and sure of what it held.

This was Gard, whose arms were holding her, whose kiss was claiming her as part of himself. With him there was no feeling of struggling against a force greater than herself or of encountering violent demand which seemed to hold something of hatred.

"Gail!" Gard lifted his head to look into her eyes. "There's something about you that puzzles me—makes me unsure. You let me kiss you and make love to you, so that at times I think you care for me. But you've never kissed me or offered your love voluntarily."

Her breath slowed and she pulled her glance away from his.

You've never offered your love!

And he was right. She had never reached out to him, never sought him, but had waited for him to come to her. Yet, last night she had clung to Earl Farmer whose eyes had been like angry black fire and held out to him a part of herself she hadn't known existed.

Gard put his hand under her chin and tilted up her face.

"Doesn't that call for an answer?"

"Yes, but I want to think about it. I have to be sure."

His arms loosened and his face became quiet.

"Then you're not sure?" he said. "That's news, Gail, because I'd thought. . . ." He broke off and said, flatly, "Guess I took too much for granted."

"I didn't mean that quite as it sounded. I wanted to say something else."

"It's all right." He brushed her cheek with his lips and put her back into her own saddle. "You're the only one who can know what you want, but I'll be here whenever you make up your mind. Let's go back to the ranch."

He wheeled his pony downtrail and as she rode after him, she was conscious of an almost frightening sense of loss. As if she had deliberately turned away from everything which was safe and known.

CHAPTER IV

Big Tim's Orders

AT TWO o'clock on the afternoon of the party for Gard, the Flying S was ready to receive the guests. The house gleamed, the living and dining rooms had been cleared for dancing and the heavy fragrance of flowers was everywhere.

And, once more Gail was alone, while her father and Gard worked behind the closed door of his office. In riding clothes, she sat at the desk in her room and pretended to write letters, wondering if she might fill up time by starting to dress for the dance.

Then she dropped her pen, strode out of the room and left the house. She had remembered again her father's calm statement, "Everyone'll come whether they want to or not." Which instantly brought Gail the thought, Earl Farmer and his friends won't be here. Neither will Esta Humphries!

The wrangler brought her pony and she rode out of the yard, across range, to the wagon trail which led northeast, toward the Falling T, Earl Farmer's spread. She kept her mount at a fast, hard gait until she neared the ranch and then pulled down to a walk, for her ears were filled with a thick, muffled pounding which was the echo of her heart. Last night he had seen her in Gard's arms, just a few minutes after he had kissed her. His lips had become hard, then, and his eyes without depth.

"I'll tell him the truth," she murmured, sending her pony through the neatly painted gates. "I'll explain that I'm engaged to Gard, or practically engaged." Then remembrance stopped the thought, stopped it like the command of a harsh voice, for she was not engaged to Gard Jackson. She had made that clear to Gard, himself.

In the yard, she saw a small, compact house hugging the earth and beyond it the stout, well made corrals and outbuildings. This was Earl Farmer's home, the spread he had built himself. . . . It was not imposing like the Flying S, of course, which her father had bought and improved with tremendous sums of money.

Almost at the same moment she halted her pony, the door opened and Farmer came out. His glance touched her and she saw the slight stiffening of his shoulders, and the guard go up in his eyes.

"Hi," she said, and got down before he could help her from the saddle. "I thought—"

She paused, her words catching in her throat. This was not what she had meant to say or must say.

"Maybe you wanted to finish our talk about the county schools," he said. "Come in, won't you?"

His voice was even and casual. He led the way into a comfortable living room, with half a dozen windows on two sides and a fireplace at the other. He pushed a chair over near the windows.

"You'll be comfortable there," he told her. "It's cool."

"Thanks. This is a nice room, big enough for a lot of things. And that reminds me. Did you get the invitation to the party at the Flying S tonight?"

His eyelids moved again but he smiled.

"Yeah, I got it. I'm sorry I can't come, but there's a dance in town tonight. It's being given by the Colorado Citizens' Party."

"A dance?"

He nodded. "We didn't send out invitations, but everyone's welcome. Maybe you ought to drop in for a few minutes, during the evening and have a look. It's being given in the Town Hall which is one of the public buildings we were talking about. The Town Hall's in the same shape as the schools."

"I went to see our district school yesterday."

"So Esta told me."

She thought, that means they must often be together. Perhaps every day.

"It's worse than you described," she said aloud. "I'm wondering about the school board, and why they stand for it. Who are the members?"

"Half a dozen local men. Ranchers, mostly. I can give you their names but it wouldn't mean anything. They take orders from your father." His voice had dropped and had become sharp as the sound of a swinging whip.

"I can't believe Dad's responsible for such things. He's not like that. Still, it's a fact which can't be ducked. So I'm going to see that something's done about the schools."

His lips moved into the crooked, twisted grin which was now as chill as his eyes.

"That's nice of you, ma'am," he said. "Probably you regard it as one of those

'charities' rich women go in for, but this is a little different. The money to build schools comes from the taxpayers."

SHE glanced at him quickly. His face was a hard barrier against her.

"I suppose you can't help feeling that way about me," she said. "I knew what you were thinking and always would think—last night. Goodby."

He came toward her swiftly. "Just a minute, Gail. I didn't want to talk about last night or remember it. But you brought it up, maybe, for the same reason you kissed me. Because it amuses you."

"Thanks."

"You needn't." His words sounded as if they had been bitten off. "And I'll give you even more satisfaction. I fell in love with you the first time I saw you and last night didn't change it. But," he added deliberately, "I'll get over it because I'll make myself."

She did not speak. She merely watched him, watched the depth of his eyes and the crooked line of his mouth. His hands lifted and his arms opened for her and slowly, she went into them.

His kiss now was different. Almost savage, as if he were trying to destroy something he could not reach. But once more her hands lifted to his face and clung until his lips returned to hers.

When the kiss ended, after brief, eternal seconds, they looked at each other silently, almost in shock.

"I'll still get over it—and fast," Farmer repeated, his voice thick.

"Are you—sure?" she asked. Her words were low. "Do you want to?"

"I wouldn't want anything else. You're not only used to everything money can give you, but you're also Big Tim Thurston's daughter, which means more than you think. Big Tim doesn't let anyone he wants to keep, escape. He'd always hold onto you and in the end you'd take his orders and live his kind of life. Maybe he'd even get to me through you. He's brought plenty of bigger men into line."

His eyes were almost shallow, barriers holding her out. Turning away, she walked from the room and out of the house.

A rider was coming through the gates. It was Esta Humphries.

"Miss Thurston!" she called. "Good morning."

"Hi. Most people call me Gail and I like it better." Gail's words and smile were friendly, but the sight of Esta had touched her with sudden, strange uneasiness. A feeling of hot, primitive discomfort. Esta was here to see Earl and she was very pretty, very alive. Probably far more attractive to him than "Big Tim's" blond daughter.

"First names are easier," the dark girl agreed. "See you tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Of course. At your party. Have you forgotten about it?"

"Guess I just wasn't thinking."

Gail rode on quickly, still struggling against the new, raw dislike. When she reached the Flying S house, Gard was in the living room.

"About time you got back," he called.

She sat down on the couch at his side. "I had to get out. This house is so full of preparations for the party that it annoys me."

"Nothing else bothering you?"

He put his arm around her slim shoulders and drew her close to him.

"Made up your mind about me?"

She went still, her body unyielding. Earl Farmer had said, "I'll get over you—fast."

"Gard!" She leaned her head against the back of the couch. "I'm mixed up. Maybe I don't know what love is. You mean a lot to me and I like being with you, but suppose I haven't the real thing, the love you want?"

He looked down into her face and took her back into his arms.

"What you feel is enough," he said, huskily, and sought her lips.

His kiss was warm with assurance and it stirred an answer from her blood. But as it ended she thought of Earl and of the fierce, primitive jealousy which Esta Humphries had aroused. When Esta, dancing with Jackson had looked at him in near adoration, none of the dark, twisting fear of loss had touched her.

"I'm still not sure," she said. "I'm sorry, Gard."

AT ten thirty, Tim Thurston, standing with Gail and Gard Jackson to receive the guests, moved restively.

"This is enough," he rumbled. "The rest'll have to get in on their own. Not nearly as many people as I expected," he added, letting his glance stray toward the living rooms.

"There's a dance in town," Gail explained. "Given by the Colorado Citizens' Party. Maybe most of them went to that."

He looked at her under heavy brows.

"Gard, go get Ellison, the foreman and bring him to my office," he said.

"Not now," Gail protested.

But Jackson, as if he did not hear her quick protest, was already moving toward the door. Mutely she watched him hurry out.

"He'll always take Dad's orders and do exactly as he's told," she was thinking.

She started for the living room, which was filled with dancers and slipped into the arms of the first man who asked for a dance. Later, she could not remember who he had been or what he had said, but she talked brightly and smiled when it was necessary.

Why had her father sent for the foreman after hearing that the new political party was giving a dance in Tarryall? And why had Gard looked so concerned as he rushed off to obey "Big Tim?"

There was another dance and another, with partners who were merely dimly familiar faces. It was eleven o'clock now and the buffet supper would be served in half an hour. When the music paused, she slipped through the crowd and out of the room, into the hall.

The door of her father's office was still closed and, in sudden, impatience, she opened it without knocking.

"This is dreadful, Dad," she started to say. "Leaving your guests!"

But his voice rumbled over her before she could speak.

"This fellow has to be stopped now, or he'll get too much strength," she heard him saying. "I don't know exactly what you should do in town, but you'll know when you get there. You may see a way to answer him and make him look foolish. Anyhow, get going."

Impulsively, Gail moved away from the door, and Gard and Ellison, the foreman came from the room, striding past her without even noticing her. They went out a moment later, hoofs beat across the yard toward the gates. They were going to Tarryall, to the dance being given by the new political party, and they were going at her father's orders!

Big Tim Thurston never lets anyone escape. Earl's words sounded in her ears like a grim whisper. And, as if she had long known what she must do, she too, hurried from the house.

Starting across the yard in her fragile, high-heeled slippers, she stumbled over the rough ground and one of the wranglers looking after the guests' carriages, turned quickly.

"Anything you want, ma'am?" he called.

"Yes. The small buckboard. I'll drive."

He brought it almost at once and helped her in.

"Looks as if everyone's lighting out for town," he said. "Don't you like your own party, ma'am?"

CHAPTER V

Triumph of Love

INSTEAD of answering the wrangler, Gail snapped the whip and sent the carriage hurrying along the drive to the wagon road. Once more she cracked the whip over the horse's back and after what seemed a very long hour, turned into the main street.

The sparse lights danced past her and half a block from the town hall, she pulled up at the edge of the road. Tying the reins to a hitchrack, she crossed the street and became part of the crowd which was overflowing from the hall itself onto the outside steps.

Music drifted thinly toward her. "Caravan!" She and Earl had danced to that. Abruptly, her throat was full and tight with pain.

The crowd parted enough to let her through and as she entered, the music was cut off abruptly.

"Attention, everyone!" a voice shouted.

The dancers turned to face the other end of the hall and an air of tension wiped out the atmosphere of gaiety.

A man—Earl Farmer—stepped up onto the orchestra platform and waved his hand at those below.

"We don't bother with introductions," he said. "We all know each other and the Colorado Citizen's Party isn't intended to waste time on talk. You know what we have to do. We must get rid of Big Tim Thurston and his gang. We have to give our kids decent schools and teachers, the chance they have a right to expect, the chance which they can never expect while Big Tim controls this county."

His voice went on, but Gail stopped listening to his words, for she was trying to see all the faces in the room, trying to find Gard Jackson and Ellison, the foreman.

A high, hard chorus of shouts made her once more aware of what he was saying.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll repeat that. If necessary we'll burn down these shacks that are called schoolhouses!"

The crowd roared again and Gail turned back, toward the door, thinking that Jackson and Ellison might have preferred not to be seen by Earl Farmer. She was almost at the entrance when she saw them, on the other side of the room. They, too, were leaving, but moving much more swiftly. They got to the door without noticing her.

She followed, hurrying down the steps. She saw them swinging onto their waiting ponies, noticed that they started north at a fast canter. She ran for her buckboard and used the whip as soon as she had the reins in her hand, sending the carriage rattling over the road, after the two men. Outside of Tarryall, they swung from the northern wagon trail onto a road going east.

"That's the way to the schoolhouse," she told herself.

The forks were just ahead of them and she slowed down so that they would not hear the sound of her carriage. They, too, slowed and Gard Jackson wheeled his pony across the range, toward the Flying S. The foreman went on, toward the school.

Getting out of the saddle only a few yards from the little building, he hurried, on foot, across the yard. He disappeared and minutes later, she saw him run from the building, leap into his saddle and turn across range, taking the same direction as Gard.

She lifted the reins in tense hands and then dropped them again. A thin, bright tongue of flame had shot out of the schoolhouse roof!

Ellison had set fire to the building!

"And Earl, in his speech, threatened just this," Gail said to herself. "Now, he'll be accused of doing it, or of being responsible for it. That's why they came. Is this what Dad meant when he told them to 'stop' Earl?"

Her hands felt cold as she wheeled the carriage around toward the main road where she turned north to the Flying S. The house was still bright with lights and music threaded through the air. A woman's laugh cut across the hum of voices.

"As if nothing had happened," she told herself. "As if my father and Gard Jackson haven't already driven Earl Farmer off the range. Starting a fire in the cattle country is as bad as rustling, and not even the people who believe in him will want him among them after this."

She left the buckboard in front of the house and went up the steps to the hall, through the groups of people who seemed like unreal, mechanical things.

THE door of her father's office was closed. As she reached it, she heard the low rumble of his voice. She knocked sharply and entered without waiting for his answer.

"Gail! Anything important? We're busy."

"I know." She looked at Gard, sitting near her father's desk, and he was a stranger. A man whose face she could not read and who had never held any part in her life.

"Dad, this can't wait."

She put her hands on his desk and leaned toward him, her eyes blazing down into his.

"Your men carried out your orders and no one will believe Earl isn't responsible. He'll be forced out of the country, just as you wanted."

"What're you talking about?"

"I heard you send for Ellison tonight. I heard you tell him and Gard to go to the meeting in town and see what they could do to make Earl Farmer look foolish. Well, I followed them, and I saw how they did it. The district schoolhouse is burning. The fire may spread to the range and, if it does, everyone, even Earl's supporters, will demand his arrest."

"Wait a minute." Tim Thurston sat back in his chair and his ruddy face lost color. "You say the school house is on fire. What's Gard or Ellison got to do with that?"

"They set the fire. Or Ellison did. Gard left him at the forks, knowing what he intended to do, and Ellison set fire to the building."

Big Tim's white head turned, like that of a great animal about to charge, and he stared at Gard.

"Is that true? Did you do that?"

Jackson's eyelids moved together.

"No," he said angrily. "At least, not that I know of. I left Ellison at the forks. He said he had an idea and I didn't bother to find out what it was. You told us to see what we could do at the meeting, but there wasn't a chance of interrupting his speech or challenging him. Everybody was for him and he held the crowd—made 'em wild. If we'd have tried to break up his talk, we'd have been mobbed."

"So you went to the schoolhouse and set fire to it? Why? How would that harm young Farmer?"

"Because he said that if necessary, the voters would burn the schoolhouses in order to get new ones," Gail interrupted. "And they should be burned. But he didn't mean it that way. So, now Earl will be ruined."

"Yeah," Big Tim lumbered to his feet. "I

get it. He'll be accused of arson—maybe of being responsible for a grass fire. Jackson!" His voice shook threateningly. "You know I don't fight that way. You'd better talk fast."

Gard was also on his feet. "There's no talking to be done. Ellison didn't tell me he intended to start a fire, but I suppose he figured you wouldn't mind. Your word is law here and you've shown you don't want any money spent on schools."

"Yeah," a voice, speaking from the doorway, broke in. "Or on anything else that might benefit the taxpayers."

Earl Farmer was standing in the open door and his eyes were black flame.

"Tarryall heard about the fire before the building was completely burned," he said. "Everyone rushed out there to stop it. Range fires are life or death in this country, Mister Thurston."

"Do you suppose I don't know that?"

"You know it, but you don't care."

"That's not true, Farmer!"

"Oh, Dad!" Gail spoke wearily. "What's the use? I've seen one of the schools. They're not fit for animals. And when I asked Gard about it he told me to keep out of politics, that you gave the orders."

"Not on that—at least, not on the details of building or repair," Big Tim said, his voice heavy and slow. "I can't handle everything and I put that into Calhoun's hands. He's a business man and a banker. I figured he would do a good job."

"He has—for himself and his friends."

Big Tim sat down, his heavy gray brows knotted over his angry eyes.

"Then he and his pals are in for a surprise, Farmer. I'm a politician and I like it. But I'm not a crook and I've never cheated the people. I made my own money long before I went into politics. Still, no one man can keep everything in his hands. He has to have an organization, people who are capable of getting things done. I thought I had one here."

"Maybe it's time you did a little investigating," Earl Farmer said. "You may be surprised."

BIG TIM was silent and Farmer turned out of the room, saying:

"We'll settle the matter of the fire tomorrow. Someone'll have to pay for it to the tune of a new schoolhouse. A modern one.

"Hold on!" Thurston barked. "I'm looking for a man who's interested in schools, who'll see that they're built and maintained. Care to take it over, if you can spare time from your spread?"

"You're forgetting that I'm going to run for office on the Colorado Citizens' ticket."

"Makes no difference. Parties are just parties and this is important. You can still hold onto your Citizens' Party and fight me. But I'd like you to take charge of the schools."

Farmer nodded and his glance, resting on Tim Thurston, had changed until it held something like admiration.

"I'll think it over and let you know."

"I want to hear from you tomorrow because I'm shaking up my entire organization and getting in some new blood. Looks as if a lot of my men belong in jail, and maybe they've even made the people of this country think I ought to be there. But we're having a change, as of now."

"I'll send you word in the morning."

Earl Farmer turned and walked into the hall and Gail followed him, although she did not speak until they reached the porch.

"What happens now?" she asked him.

"Now?"

"Between us."

He was still. So close to her that his arm almost brushed his shoulder he did not move or attempt to touch her. But the hard crookedness had left his mouth and once more she felt as though, a very long time ago, they had known each other. And together, had known love.

"You'd still want me?" he said to her. "After today. And the things I said?"

"Words aren't important. Or, maybe they are, for us. Maybe I have to tell you this, so you'll understand about Gard Jackson. I thought I loved him and I would have married him, if I hadn't met you."

He stirred, sharply, and his hands closed on her slim shoulders. "You're sure, Gail? You'll never get to doubt it?"

"Never," she said. "I wasn't sure about Gard, but I am about you. I don't want him to be hurt in this. But even if he is, it can't make any difference."

"He won't be—long," Earl said. "Esta Humphries will make him forget all about it. She's been in love with him for a long time. She told me that this afternoon. She said she didn't even care which side he was on, just as long as she was with him."

"Then—"

But she did not finish, for Earl's kiss stopped her words.

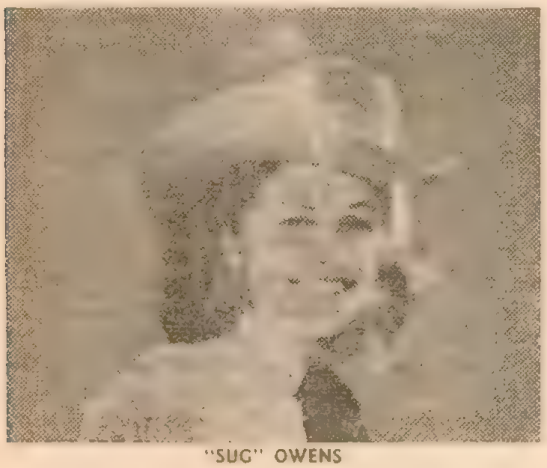
WESTERN RANCH GIRLS

by FOGHORN CLANCY

FAMOUS RANCH AND RODEO EXPERT

LOTTIE JO OWENS is known as "Sug" or "Sugar" down Ozona way, Texas, and that ought to give you an idea of how sweet she is. Nineteen years old now, she is five feet two, weighs one hundred and eleven pounds, has a luxurious head of rich brown lovely hair, a set of teeth that would make a dentist sigh with ecstasy, full, tender lips, and beautiful big brown eyes. In short, she's beautiful.

You wouldn't blame a girl like that for being a bit of a hothouse flower; for taking



"SUG" OWENS

care of that peaches and cream skin and seeing she didn't get dishpan hands. Especially if her dad owns 20,000 acres of range, with cows and horses to match.

Not the Hothouse Type

But Sug Owens isn't the hothouse type. She was born on this ranch and has been riding horseback ever since she was big enough to stick to the saddle.

You wouldn't think, at first glance, that she was strong enough or tough enough to stay aboard a cowpony when that collection of steel springs and pure cussedness went into action against a herd of wild steers. You'd be wrong. Sug can dash into that herd like a cowpuncher and cut out any one, or any number of steers, take them where she wants to go and make no fuss about it.

She can dab a loop on a ducking, fast-running calf, jump down, pounce on the critter, dump the two hundred pound critter flat on its side, corral the thrashing legs and hogtie them with pigging string from her belt and serve up the astonished dogie for the branding iron in nothing flat.

The mere matter that the calf weighs a heap more than she does herself has nothing to do with it. It's brains against brawn.

An Expert Ranch Girl

In short, Sug Owens is not only one of the most beautiful, she is one of the most expert ranch girls the great state of Texas has ever produced.

She grew up half wild in that great isolated ocean of grass, learning to ride and to throw her lariat with unerring precision. As soon as she was big enough to sit her horse and dodge wild cattle she started to tag her father everywhere on the ranch and pretty soon to help him in handling the cattle.

When she grew old enough to go to school, her dad called a halt. He was proud of his daughter and though prejudiced in her behalf, others too confirmed his opinion that she was beautiful and that she had brains and spirit to match.

"Sug," he said, "you're good looking, but you've got to have some education to go along with your looks. I'm not going to have you grow up out here as wild as a hawk!"

Off to Town

So off to town she went. If she was lonesome and homesick for the free life of the range and felt shut in and stifled at the closeness of town and the restrictions of school, she got over it. She studied hard and got good marks. Of course, week-ends and vacations she got out to the ranch again and

Introducing "Sug" Owens, Lovely Texas Top-Hand!

rode the range with her father. Thus she went through grade school and high school.

And all this time, though probably neither she nor her father realized it, she was getting another kind of schooling which was to prove just as important in her life.

She was perfecting her riding, roping and shooting. Her dad had been an expert steer roper at rodeos some years ago when steer roping was the principal event. He taught her to handle the lariat. He also taught Sug's older sister, Margaret Owens, who became champion cowgirl calf roper of Texas, and married Vic Montgomery, top hand rodeo cowboy.

Sponsor Girl

Sug's unusual beauty attracted attention and her riding ability won her a place as sponsor girl in many of the Texas rodeos. Since these rodeos are held mostly during school vacation time, Sug had the opportunity to participate in many of them while she was still going to school.

She began to win prizes and trophies. She won first prize as sponsor girl two years in succession at the Pecos rodeo and won second place in the cowgirl's calf-roping contest.

First prize was won by her sister Margaret. Sug didn't mind losing to her at all. In fact, she soon got used to it, for whenever Margaret and she were in the same contest, Margaret won, but if Margaret was not entered, Sug usually walked off with first prize.

Her Own Brand

Upon being graduated from high school, Sug entered Texas Christian University at Fort Worth. She had meanwhile become a rancher, for like all cattlemen, her father had started a little herd of cattle, horses and sheep for her, which had grown and increased. She selected her own brand—an anchor—and rode into the county seat to have it formally registered.

The war found her a sophomore at TCU. With the call for men, the ranges were stripped of cowboys and the big ranches, with their essential job of supplying beef for food, found themselves crippled. In this emergency, the girls of the West played a part which has not yet been properly recognized. They sailed in to take the place of their men.

Sug Owens was right up front. She left school, dropped everything to return home and help her father. And back on the ranch she went to work like a cowboy, doing the same heavy, tiring job, sharing the same risks and dangers and never uttering a peep about how strenuous it all was for a hundred and eleven pound girl.

Round-up, branding, dehorning, doctoring, driving cattle—she went through it all, summer and winter, at her father's side.

To those who know the rigors of a cowboy's life, this ranks with the celebrated feats of the pioneer women who came across the plains to fight Indians, animals and weather, to establish homes in the wilderness. Sug Owens and the other girls like her are real Americans, real daughters of the West with all the character and courage that this implies.

Sug came out of this gruelling experience with the same radiant disposition, the same sunny personality and schoolgirl beauty. Scouts for the World's Championship Rodeo at Madison Square Garden selected her as one of the 1944 Glamour ranch girls for the big New York show.

A Tempting Offer

She had just won the sponsor girls contest at the Midland, Texas, rodeo of July, 1944, which attracted the attention of the scout to her. When he made the offer, with its invitation to visit the big city and the biggest rodeo of all, expenses paid, plus an additional salary that was very tempting, Sug hesitated.

"I don't think I can go," she said. "I have so much work to do on the ranch and help is so scarce—"

But Dad Owens heard that and he broke in. Down in the Southwest it is considered the greatest of honors for a ranch girl to be invited to New York for the great rodeo and it makes her parents very proud and happy. Dad Owens had been hoping for this invitation and he didn't intend to let her turn it down, no matter how lonely he might be without her.

"You're going," he said.

"But dad—the stock—"

"I can get along with the stock. I've been talking it over with our neighbor Emmett Gordon—that's how sure I was you'd get this invitation—and he has volunteered to lend me one of his cowboys while you're gone."

Sug's main objection was thus taken care of and it was settled that she was to come to New York and take part in the rodeo with Roy Rogers, the famous cowboy movie star. Of course, she knew she'd have competition, for there were five other ranch beauties who were also going along.

Glamorous—But Unspoiled

The job of being a glamour girl at the big rodeo doesn't call for looking beautiful alone. There is much hard riding to be done, many public appearances to make to get

Miss Owens makes a pretty picture on horseback

publicity for the rodeo, trips to hospitals to entertain ill or wounded soldiers who can't get to Madison Square Garden and similar public duties.

All the time, the attention and flattery and publicity, thrown at the head of simple ranch girls, most of them unsophisticated and very much unused to such a life, is enough to turn their heads. It is to their credit that it doesn't often happen. Sug Owens remained the same unspoiled, sweet unassuming girl at the end of the show as when she first came to New York.

When a reporter on one of the New York papers asked Sug if she'd like to marry a city boy, her answer was typical.

"I'll marry the man I love," she said. "I'm not looking for a husband yet, but I will try hard to keep from falling in love with a city man. I am a cow country girl, my folks are cow country people and I want my husband to be one of us. It would be better for all of us. The chances are a hundred to one that I will marry a cowboy."

Her Heart Is in Texas

Which gives you an idea that under that beautiful head of hair is a set of brains that really works. At only nineteen, Sug Owens has a pretty clear idea of the way life treats people and of the way for her. It is something many older people have yet to learn. She knows where the roots of her life are planted.

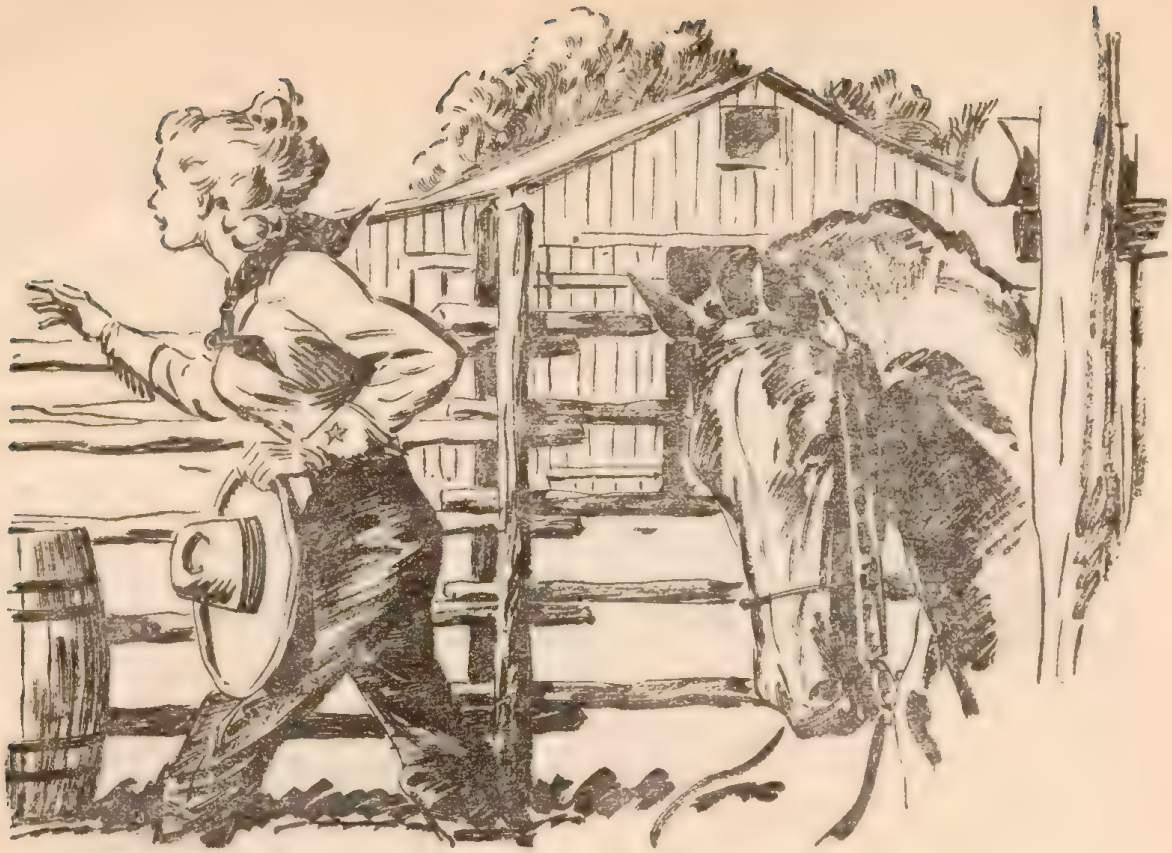
New York was wonderful, as it is to all who come to its fairyland from outside. But her heart was in Texas and she was impatient to get back, to ride again beside her father on the range, to see the cattle and count the new calves. That was her place.

●

WESTERN RANCH GIRLS, by Foghorn Clancy, is a regular feature appearing in every issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES

A Glamorous Novelet

Unseen, Noel watched the blond girl run toward Bruce's welcoming arms



The Heart Rustler

By THELMA KNOLES

Charming Noel Farley was green in the ways of the West, but she was true-blue to the man who doubted her love!

CHAPTER I

Dude Heroine

HEAT waves shimmered in the big ranch kitchen as Myrtle looked at her guest's downcast face.

"You'll love this country, Noel," Myrtle promised, "when you get used to it."

"The country's all right," Noel replied quickly, "even if I *am* such a rank tenderfoot. It's just—"

She stopped short of voicing her deep disappointment, but the kitchen was suddenly full of Myrtle's unspoken sympathy. Noel could feel it as definitely as the heat waves radiating from the huge black range. She spread the damp dish towel over the line back of the stove, and brushed a strand of coppery hair back from the flushed face.

"You get some rest, Myrtle, while the children are napping," she suggested, tossing her apron over a chair and standing trim and lovely in tailored green shorts and white halter-bra. "I'm going to take a walk and do some thinking."

"Don't feel so bad about Keith McGowan's being away," Myrtle said gently. "He couldn't help it because his brother sent him to Denver the day before you arrived. Bruce is really the boss, you know."

"So it seems."

Noel couldn't help showing her hurt. She pushed open the screen door and went out. Gingerly, she walked across the yard, picking her way between needle-sharp hooks of devil-claw and the thorny branches of dwarf mesquite. Platform-soled playshoes were definitely not the thing to wear around a ranch, she decided ruefully.

She was still painfully trying to reconcile Keith's absence with the ardent pleasure he'd expressed in his letters at the prospect of her visit West, when she encountered the barbed-wire fence. A movement later she was firmly caught in its steely claws.

After her first anguished cry, Noel moved cautiously lest she ensnare herself still further, bending low in her efforts to free herself. Her hair fell in a blinding shower over her face while she fumbled with the barb piercing the shoulder strap that was a twist of white across her bronze back.

She heard the clink of shod hoofs on pebbly ground, and almost immediately the thud of booted feet. Thank goodness, Dick had come to her rescue! A shadow fell in front of her, a shadow of wide shoulders and large cowboy hat.

"Having a little trouble?" asked a deep voice that assuredly did not belong to Myrtle's husband, Dick.

Noel squirmed to get her head around so that she could see, and a slow flush spread over her face as she caught the irrepressible laughter in the stranger's eyes. Then big, sure fingers took the strap out of her hands. A sturdy boot came down on the lower wire.

Thoroughly flustered and embarrassed, Noel scrambled through and straightened to face the rancher. His gray eyes still twinkling, he swept his wide hat off to show black-brown hair cut short to his well-shaped head.

"These fences are tricky," he explained gravely, "to a gr—new-comer."

He might as well have said "greenhorn," Noel thought. She tried gamely to grin, but she had a fair idea of how ridiculous she must have appeared. Then as she looked at the rancher more sharply her expression changed.

"You're Bruce McGowan," she observed tonelessly. The laughter died out of his eyes.

"I am. And you must be that Eastern girl who—"

He broke off and Noel took it up, echoing his antagonism.

"The girl who helped entertain your brother in New York when he said he was a friend and neighbor of the Brownells."

THERE was a decided resemblance between the two brothers, Noel couldn't help observing. Only Bruce was set in a harder, firmer mold than Keith. And his eyes were steely gray instead of dancing hazel.

"Keith isn't at the ranch now," Bruce declared with an air of quiet satisfaction. Color flamed into Noel's face.

"So I understand." She added deliberately, "I'm staying with the Brownells all summer."

The man's mouth tightened and his eyes narrowed as he considered her. It was true, Noel realized with a sense of shock. This older brother really was opposed to Keith's becoming seriously interested in an Eastern girl. And evidently he did intend to cause all the trouble he could, just as Keith had said.

"Listen, Miss Farley," Bruce McGowan was saying, "I reckon I'd better make a few things clear to you. First, my brother isn't any playboy. He's a working rancher. That Eastern trip was just a fling after college. Now he has to settle down to business."

Though seething with indignation, Noel looked at him coldly.

"I don't intend to distract your brother from his work, Mr. McGowan," she pointed out inadequately.

"I'm not so sure of that," he replied.

His keen, unfriendly glance traveled from the shining mane of auburn hair curling on her bare shoulders, down over the graceful, curved figure set off by a scanty sports attire, and rested finally on the dainty, scarlet-tipped feet in open sandals.

As though that sharp gray glance had the power to project itself, Noel felt a sting at the curve of her instep. She cried out, snatched at her foot.

"Look out!" the rancher exclaimed, reaching for her. "You're standing plumb on an ant hill."

Awkwardly Noel hopped away without his help, but her foot slid out of the straps of her sandal and came down hard on the ground. She gave a piercing scream.

"Sandburr," Bruce declared.

Firmly, he seized her ankle with one hand while he extracted the burr with the other. Involuntarily Noel was forced to throw her arms around his neck for support.

Presently, he released her ankle and adjusted her sandal. Noel hastily took her arms from his neck, but she hesitated about putting her foot down. Then she realized that the rancher's arm was still around her, supporting her.

"Thank you," she acknowledged stiffly. "I can manage now."

But he didn't move away. Instead she felt his eyes on her face, and she looked up with defiant, stormy blue eyes.

"Listen, Noel Farley," he was saying quietly, "this is a tough country. Too tough for you. But it's Keith's country and his life. You'd better not waste your time around here."

Noel winced as she put her foot down.

"Let me go," she protested shakily.

Suddenly she was conscious of Bruce McGowan's arm around her. Of his closeness and strength. She couldn't think clearly with his hard, firm hand at her waist, his arm pressing along her back. He—he was so very much like Keith. And so different. It set her heart to racing, her blood to humming.

"And another thing," Bruce continued. "In case you can't see it, the Brownells have about all they can handle without a dude guest for the summer."

"Why," Noel sputtered indignantly, "I'm helping Myrtle; she needs me."

"About like she needs a beautiful silk hobble," he retorted. His eyes suddenly gleamed. "You leave Myrtle alone," he ordered. "She's having it kind of tough right now, but she and Dick are happy. Don't you make trouble at Faraway Ranch."

Swiftly, Noel recovered her poise, and looked scornfully straight into those hard gray eyes.

"You can boss Keith because yon handle the money, Bruce McGowan," she flared. "I could see that last spring. But you can't scare me."

"No?"

His eyes dropped from hers to the angry curve of her mouth. A soft, red mouth as warm-looking as the crimson paint-brush flowers that blew in the wind.

He kissed her hard, his mouth taking hers with a firmness and thoroughness that blotted the rest of the world from existence. After a second or two Noel quit struggling. This was one kiss she couldn't control.

When he released her she stood very straight and still. Her lips were tingling, she felt charged with a new and dizzying current of life. She stood quiet in the blazing sunshine.

"And listen, Noel Farley," Bruce warned sternly, "Keith has a girl here in Santa Maria Valley. They've been sweethearts for years."

Abruptly, he swung up onto his horse.

"Adios," he flung out, and Noel, completely baffled, looked after him as he rode away.

Slowly the stunned expression faded from her eyes as she walked toward the inviting shade of a huge walnut tree, picking her way in the foolish playshoes.

When she finally settled herself on the sand of the dry wash, with her back propped against the wide tree trunk, she wasn't brooding about Keith McGowan. Instead she felt strangely exhilarated. Idly, she pushed the white sand into a little heap, a shining castle, and drifted into a dreamy state of unthinking content.

A loud clap of thunder brought her back to the world. Noel looked up to see storm clouds hanging dark over the nearest range of mountains. Then lightning was shooting wicked tongues of white flame across the peaks, and straight gray bands of rain joined clouds and earth. Remembering Dick's warning about flash floods, Noel rose from the sand and climbed up the bank of the wide arroyo.

She walked slowly along, watching the storm, breathing the sweet scent of dampness on the wind that lifted her hair and tossed it into gleaming silken banners. As she rounded a curve in the arroyo, she heard the shrill voice of a child, chanting a sing-song rhyme. She smiled as she saw the tiny Mexican girl sitting under a spreading walnut tree and rocking her doll in her arms.

Then, frighteningly, a cry of warning broke from Noel's lips. For she heard a threatening roar from up the canyon, and as she whirled about to look, a little curve of frothy water slithered around the bend. The child glanced up at Noel's cry, stood fixedly in the center of the wash, staring with curious round brown eyes at the stranger.

Frantically, Novel waved and shouted, but the baby stood unmoving.

AS Noel slid and fell down the steep bank into the sandy arroyo bed a wall of water swirled sickeningly around the bend. Not a moment too soon she reached the little girl just as the flood struck. Though she lost her footing in the swift rush of muddy water, she had a firm hold on the wriggling

little body. The walnut tree was some twenty feet downstream, and Noel thrashed and plunged her way toward it. Miraculously, as the current swept her by, she caught a low-hanging branch with her free hand.

Gasping, she drew herself up, and spat out dirty water. The little girl shook her head clear, sputtered and clutched bewilderedly at Noel's shoulder. Faintly, through the roaring in her ears and the sound of the rushing water, Noel heard a shout from the bank. Cautiously she tried to turn her head toward the voice. There was a whistling sound past her head, and a rope fell in a loop across her branch, catching on a broken twig.

Noel got the fiercely clutching little arms clasped around her neck and snatched the dangling rope. The instant the loop was around her body it tightened snugly, there was a strong pull, and Noel took a deep breath, dropped her desperately aching arm from the tree.

Swiftly, she was hauled through the water and up the bank, where strong hands caught and lifted her.

"We'll get this lariat off," Bruce McGowan's voice came to her through her own sputtering and choking.

"Rosita!" came a shrill cry. *"Ninita mia!"*

Dazedly, Noel pushed her wet hair out of her eyes as a Mexican woman snatched the child up into her arms.

"Rosita's all right, Maria," Bruce was reassuring her. "Get some dry clothes on her and for the love of Pete don't let her play in the wash alone again."

Noel struggled to stand up, but her knees refused to help her.

"I'm all r-right," she gasped.

"Listen, lady," Bruce said gruffly, lifting her high. "You're shaking with cold. We'll get you dried out, pronto."

Carefully, he set her up on his horse and stepped into the saddle, cradling her in his arms as easily as though she'd been Rosita. "The house is just over the hill here."

With a shaken sigh, Noel let her wet head fall against his solid shoulder. The world was still spinning around her. She could still taste that horrid, muddy water. Could hear it roaring in her ears, pulling at her, trying to hurl her down and drag her over mounds of stones. She shuddered, and Bruce's arm tightened around her.

"I rode back to warn you about the floods," Bruce explained above her head. "At first I didn't see you, and began heading for the house. Then I rounded the bend and saw how you went after Rosita." There was a rough note of respect, of admiration in his voice. "You saved that kid's life."

Noel didn't reply. She was thinking how warm and secure his strong, hard body was. How incredibly agreeable it felt to be held close and tenderly. She snuggled closer to him, like a drenched kitten.

"Here we are," Bruce presently announced, lifting her down and setting her on her feet. But he held her arm to steady her as he led the way into the house, through a hall and into a big room that was a combination living-room and office.

"Lupe!" he shouted. "Make hot coffee, pronto."

CHAPTER II
Heartbreak Lane

NOEL sat shivering in an immense black leather chair while Bruce knelt on the hearth, piling wood and kindling into the fireplace. Soon the fire was darting up and around the twisted sticks, and Noel leaned toward it eagerly, her teeth chattering.

Bruce went out and came back with towels and a big, wooly, blue bathrobe.

"Get your things off and into this," he ordered, and then was gone again.

A sudden blush warmed her cheeks as Noel looked down at her scanty shorts. They clung to her figure in wet, revealing wrinkles. Her cotton halter-top exaggerated every modeled curve. Vigorously, she rubbed herself into a glow with the towels and then wrapped the blue robe about her. She pulled the cord tight and tied it in big, dangling loops.

Next her hair. Rubbing it briskly, she shook out each strand, until it hung, a glittering shower as bright as the firelight. She tossed back the fluffing, fragrant mass, and raised her head as she heard the footsteps. Bruce was standing quietly in the door. He was holding a cup of coffee, and he stood very still, looking at Noel, his eyes intent on her.

Noel laughed, a nervous little sound, and ran her hands through her drying hair. The firelight caught it in ripples of light as she bent over to pick up the sodden handful of clothing.

Bruce handed her the coffee and reached for her clothes.

"Lupe can dry and iron them for you," he assured.

In a moment he was back with another cup of coffee and a plate of sugary doughnuts. Sitting before the roaring fire, Noel felt deliciously relaxed and comfortable, conscious of Bruce's robe snugly enfolding her, soft to her skin. She looked around the big room, at the pictures lining the walls. Pictures of bulls, curly-faced, short-horned, placid-looking beasts.

"Family portraits?" she asked, trying desperately to be her old frivolous self.

Bruce laughed, his voice warm and hearty, sending ripples of sensation through the girl.

"Listen, lady," he began, "they're from a darn good family at that. Their pedigree goes back a couple of hundred years. The Domino line, originally out of England—" he broke off. "Say, why didn't you stop me?"

"Don't stop," Noel protested, her eyes shadowy purple, her cheeks touched to rose by the firelight. "I love it."

"Listen, Noel," he said soberly, after a time. "I reckon I owe you an apology."

He stood up and moved over to her chair.

"Oh, no."

Noel was on her feet, too, the robe falling in long folds over her bare feet.

"Yes," Bruce contradicted. His eyes were crystal gray, looking deep into hers. "I made some crack-brained, critical remarks about Eastern society girls, and well—I was talking through my hat. I mean, if you're any example, why—" he floundered on, "there aren't any better anywhere."

Noel's eyes were shining violet stars, as she lifted her hands to him. She felt the wild rush of color to her cheeks, the betraying quiver to her lips. This was what she'd waited for all her life. Her heart knew, there could be no mistake—this was the man she loved. She thought she had found him in Keith. But Keith was only a faint shadow of Bruce, his brother.

"Bruce," she murmured softly.

Then his arms were around her, were gathering her close. He pressed his cheek against the silken, flower-sweet cloud of her hair. She felt his arms, his hands, strong and warm, through the thickness of robe. She moved her head back against his shoulder and his eyes met hers, searched through them and saw the trembling eagerness there. He kissed her, slowly, gently. Then when her arms went around his shoulders, clinging, his lips flamed with a sweetness and fire that blazed through her.

There came a sharp bang. Loud footsteps sounded in the hall and a man's voice called, "Hello, this ranch!"

Noel and Bruce stood apart. She pulled the robe more tightly around her. Bruce casually drew paper and tobacco from his shirt pocket and was manipulating them into a cigarette when the living room door swung open.

There was Keith, staring at them, his dusty range hat in his hand. It was Bruce who spoke first.

"I thought you were just about reaching Denver by now," he remarked evenly.

Keith's eyes turned to Noel who couldn't control the hot color staining her cheeks.

"I met Tim Parker in Flagstaff," he replied defiantly. "He was going to Denver, too, and he offered to pick up that bull you bought."

He dropped his hat, and crossed the room to Noel. She quickly began to explain about Rosita and the flood.

"I'll see if Lupe has your clothes ready," Bruce remarked stiffly, and left the room.

"I had to get back and see you, Noel," Keith said, catching her hands in his. "In spite of old Bruce." His hazel eyes were bright and warm. "You look like a million even in that get-up." He tried to draw her into his arms. "How about a kiss?"

Noel pushed him away.

"Don't, Keith. I'm still all shaky from that ducking."

"Baby, you sure worked fast," Keith chuckled admiringly. "Bruce is an ornery, stubborn cuss, but you roped him in like a locoed bronc with hobbles on. You're plenty smart."

"But, Keith—" Noel began to protest when Bruce spoke from the doorway.

"Reckon your clothes are ready, Noel."

He came on into the room. His eyes meeting Noel's were direct and cool, and she felt a stab of panic.

She shot a furious glance at Keith. The idiot, she fumed. Bruce heard that remark and he'd think—he'd think—

"Let's clear out," Bruce suggested, "so Noel can dress." He handed her the clothes, still warm from the iron. "Keith can take you back to the Brownells." His expression impenetrable, he turned to his brother. "Saddle up that little pinto for her."

"Be waiting for you, beautiful," Keith called gaily as the two men went out.

But Noel's violet eyes were fixed unhappily on Bruce's broad back.

ON the ride to Faraway Ranch Keith was enthusiastic.

"I expected old Bruce to give me blazes about coming back. But he didn't say a word." His eyes rested in bold admiration on Noel sitting very straight in the saddle, her slender bare legs shapely against the pinto's black and white hide. "Baby, will you set this range to humming!" He reached for her hand, but she side-stepped her pony. "Know what Bruce said, Noel? That he'd been all wrong about you. That you were brave and quick as well as beautiful."

"Really? He said that?" Noel's eyes were soft and radiant.

"Yep," Keith replied smugly. "We'll have his blessing from now on. And I reckon we'll need it. You know what Bruce says goes around Santa Maria Valley. Dad left everything in his hands."

Myrtle met them in a flutter of excitement. The news of Rosita's rescue had travelled like the wind, and Noel was a heroine.

When the two girls were alone, preparing dinner in the hot kitchen, Myrtle became confidential.

"You know we can't blame Bruce for holding a close rein on Keith. He's had to take care of him ever since their parents died, though he really isn't much older."

"Oh," said Noel in a low voice.

Myrtle bent to slide a pan of cornbread into the oven.

"And Keith has been in several scrapes," she went on. "He likes to show off and girls just will get the idea that he's a wealthy rancher and try to get something out of him."

"I understand," Noel remarked, slamming a plate down on the table but keeping her voice even. "So when he went back East and started writing home about me, Brother Bruce decided I was another gold-digger."

"Anyhow all's well that ends well," Myrtle declared brightly. "Bruce made a point of telling Dick this afternoon what a wonderful person you are."

After dinner, Keith rode over all ready with plans for a moonlight ride. Noel refused on the grounds that she might be catching a cold and had better go right to bed.

"You don't look sick to me," Keith said suspiciously. His hazel eyes warmed as he took in the yellow voile dress that made her look like a flame-tipped flower. "You're a knock-out, Noel."

However, he finally left with the airy remark that he might as well ride over to the Carleton's. There was a jaunty swing to his shoulders as he loped away.

Myrtle, buttoning her small son's pajamas, looked up with a frown.

"Did he say Carleton's?" she asked. She shot a significant glance at Dick. "Is Edna back from Nogales?"

Dick put down a Mother Goose book and rose with a sleepy baby in his arms.

"Time for bed, Pats." He picked up the little boy. "Come on, Bobby." Then to Myrtle. "Edna? Sure." He grinned teasingly at Noel who was raptly gazing at the sunset sky. "Better be careful, Noel. Edna's the belle of the valley, and she's had old Keith staked out for hers when he got tired of romping around."

"Dick!" Myrtle broke in. "That was just a puppy love affair."

She looked anxiously at Noel.

But her guest was still gazing dreamily at the sunset. She was remembering that Rosita had lost her doll in the flood. She was thinking that she could take the painted china head that decorated her pincushion and fashion a cotton stuffed body for it, dress it, and take it to the little Mexican girl. It would at least be a pretext for seeing Bruce once more.

She rode over to the Santa Maria ranch next afternoon with the doll. Lupe informed her that Bruce was riding around the ranch somewhere, and directed her to the adobe houses in an oak grove back of the barn where the Mexican help and their families lived.

Though Rosita was delighted with the doll, Noel felt let-down and dull with disappointment. She walked slowly back toward the barn, hating to leave without seeing Bruce, when she spotted his big chestnut hitched at a corral gate. Her heart gave a happy bound against her ribs. So, he had ridden in just in time.

Eagerly, she hurried around the barn—and then stopped short. Bruce was not alone. He stood some distance away, on the path to the house. And he was holding out his arms to a girl.

Noel's shocked eyes went beyond to the palomino pony with trailing reins standing in the ranch yard. The girl must have just ridden up, and jumped off her pony. Now

she was running down the path and into Bruce's arms. Jealousy as sharp as a naked blade twisted through Noel, robbing her of reason, of everything but savage pain and anger.

CHAPTER III

Blonde Rival

THE first spasm of helpless protest passed, and she backed slowly away, around the barn. She mounted and headed her horse away from the ranchhouse, with the barn hiding her from view of the path. And as she put the miles between her and the Santa Maria ranch, the wild storm of emotion that was tearing her to pieces subsided into a heavy, dull pain around her heart.

Unseeing, Noel rode on and on, past miles of barbed wire fence and oak-dotted pasture land. Only when she had reached the stretch of fencing and white monument that marked the Mexican border did she turn back. Her plans were made. She'd return East immediately. Perhaps, she thought, she could persuade Myrtle to go home with her for a much needed vacation.

Before she could tell Myrtle her plans, Dick dashed into the kitchen, practically on her heels.

"Say, Myrtle, I have to ride over to the Parkers' to see about that windmill rigging." He splashed noisily at the sink and asked through dripping fingers, "One of you girls want to come along?"

"You go, Myrtle," Noel urged instantly. "I'm tired, and I'll stay with Bobby and Pats."

With a naughty grimace at the basket of ironing under the kitchen table, Myrtle tied a sombrero over her dark curls and flew out after Dick. Her gay laugh sounded from the corral and Noel smiled tenderly. Poor Myrtle, it was a real treat for her to get out at all.

They'd hardly ridden out of sight when the bedroom door opened and Bobby stumbled out, rubbing his eyes. Noel sat him up at the kitchen table with cookies and milk.

He stared at her owlishly.

"We had comp'ny."

"You did?" Noel asked absently. "Who?"

"Edna Carleton," Bobby explained. "She was awful mad. She was cryin' and she said no red-haired dude could stampede out here and put her brand on *her* man." Bobby gulped his milk. "Who'd she mean, Auntie Noel?"

Noel's cheeks were red as she bent to pick up cookie crumbs.

"More milk, Bobby?" she asked hastily.

"Nope." Bobby resumed his story, mumbling through a mouth crammed with cookies. "Edna said she allowed she wasn't going to give up so easy just because this red-haired man rustler pulled a grandstand stunt and made herself a—a—heron—when she knew all along Bruce was right on her trail and wouldn't let nothin' happen to her." He swallowed his cookies with a gulp. "How could she be a heron?"

There was a sudden roar from the bedroom and Noel went in to little Pats. Bobby trailed after her.

"Edna said she'd show this smart so-and-so. She'd show her up for the phony she was." He went on steadily, "Edna said first chance she got she'd scare the socks off that dude and send her home a-yippin'. She'd learn her to stay in her own corral."

"Oh, she did?" exclaimed Noel, her eyes smoldering blue. "Just how was she going to do that?"

She let the side of Pats' bed down with a bang.

"Mama told her not to lose her head and do anything silly and Edna said she'd show who was silly—her or that red-headed tenderfoot who went traipsin' around in a bathing suit."

Bobby and Pats settled contentedly down on the living-room floor with their blocks, but Noel felt a restlessness that had to be taken out in action. She remembered Myrtle's parting glance at the basket of ironing, and grimly hauled it out.

She built up the fire, moved the flat-irons to the front of the stove, and set the ironing board across the backs of two chairs. Thoughts of Edna Carleton whipped through her mind as she thumped the iron down, felt the steam sizzle up from the damp clothes. The acid memory of the blonde girl in Bruce McGowan's arms rose to taunt her once more as she awkwardly guided the point of the iron between a row of buttons.

"Ouch!" she cried, and childishly thrust a seared fingertip into her mouth.

"What happened?" Bruce McGowan's voice filled the kitchen just as his big frame filled the doorway. He ambled to her side. "I see." Then he promptly strode into the

bedroom and came back with a tube of ointment. "This'll take the fire out of it."

"You're always coming to my rescue," Noel said with forced lightness.

She was shamefacedly conscious of her quickened breathing, of Bruce's keen eyes on her flushed face. Disconcerted, she pushed the damp ringlets from her forehead.

"Dick and Myrtle went over to the Parkers," she explained hastily, trying to keep from trembling at his nearness as he carefully smeared the ointment on her finger.

Bruce's eyes swept over the laundry basket, over the freshly ironed clothes hung over the chairs. He took out his bandanna and mopped his face. When he spoke it was almost angrily.

"Listen, Noel"—he gestured toward the irons on the stove—"do you still want to marry a rancher?"

Noel looked up at him, was caught and lost in his clear, unsmiling eyes.

"Yes," she announced vehemently, "I do."

Would he never understand that it would always be only he, Bruce, that she wanted? She would even, Noel thought forlornly, glory in ironing Bruce's shirts.

"Then," Bruce replied loudly, "go ahead and marry Keith. If that's the way you feel about it." He glared at the laundry basket. "I reckon I was wrong about you all the way. About your imposing on the Brownells. Looks like you're out to kill yourself to show you belong here."

Noel felt the color draining from her face. She swayed slightly. Then she steadied herself, took a careful grip on the iron and carried it over to the stove.

"What's the matter?" Bruce asked sharply.

He reached her in two steps. Noel's lips trembled. She couldn't look at him. She couldn't tell him that she didn't want to marry Keith at all—never had—now that she had found her only true love.

BRUCE slipped a supporting arm around her, and she went lax against him. Then he was lifting her off her feet, carrying her out of the kitchen, out to the shady side of the house.

"That heat's enough to make anyone faint," he growled. "Heaven knows, I suggested that the Brownells could send their laundry over to my place. Maria and Lupe and their tribe could handle it. But no, they're too darn proud."

"I'm all right now." Noel pushed herself out of his arms. "Myrtle and I can finish that in the morning, before it gets hot." She was still trembling from his touch, from the aching desire to go back into his arms.

"Did you come to see Dick?" she asked resolutely.

"No. Maria told me you'd been at the ranch," Bruce replied. "And I wanted to see you anyway. I wanted to make sure you were serious about Keith and staying out here."

Challengingly, Noel's violet eyes lifted to his. And because she was afraid she'd burst into tears and betray her love for him, because she could still see that fair-haired girl in his arms, she whipped herself into defiant anger.

"I like it here," she declared brusquely. "I'm staying."

Myrtle came back from the Parkers bubbling with plans.

"Dick will have to go into Nogales tomorrow to see about the windmill rigging," she said excitedly.

"And Mrs. Parker offered to take Bobby and Pats for the day, so we can go."

"Grand," Noel acknowledged mechanically.

"The McGowans will be going in too," Dick added. "Bruce mentioned it this afternoon."

A flash of radiance sang through Noel.

"The trip sounds lovely!" she declared with sudden enthusiasm.

"I do hope we can take Noel into the curio shops across the line," Myrtle was saying. "Are they having any election day disturbances over there now, Dick?"

Noel never heard Dick's reply. She was too busy planning what to wear.

She had planned well, for even Dick whistled with appreciation when she appeared in beige and brown linen, with a tricky, veiled hat, saucy, high-heeled pumps, and the delicate coppery make-up that gave her bare legs a sleek, silken gleam.

They had a delicious Mexican dinner in a cool, shaded patio cafe in the heart of the border city. Myrtle was constantly waving and nodding to acquaintances.

"Everybody in the valley comes to town on Saturday," she confided gaily, "and we always eat here."

"Didn't I hear you making a date last night with old Keith at the jeweler's?" Dick asked Noel. "Three guesses why."

Noel looked a bit grim. She hadn't yet managed to tactfully get it across to Keith that she didn't want him to buy her a ring.

That she didn't want him—period.

"There's Edna," Myrtle said suddenly. "Heading this way, too."

She gave Dick a quick, warning glance.

Deliberately, Noel set down her coffee cup and turned to look at the girl coming to their table. She wasn't surprised to recognize the blonde who'd been in Bruce's arms.

There was no question but Edna Carleton was pretty. She had gray-blue eyes and a dimple in her cheek. Her hair bounced on her shoulders in fat, yellow curls, and she walked with the air of being princess of her domain.

During Myrtle's rather nervous introduction, Edna's eyes flashed over Noel from hat to shoes, and she visibly relaxed. It was obvious that she felt better dressed in her ruffled, flowered rayon and big floppy hat.

"I was just talking to Keith and Bruce," the blonde girl announced airily. "They said they'd meet us all at the Plaza in about two hours."

Noel looked down at her coffee cup, and willed her hand not to shake. She was miserably conscious of the triumph in Edna's voice, of the sick dismay, the lance of jealousy that pierced her. So, Edna's manner conveyed smugly, while you've been sitting here, I've already been with *him*.

"Good," Dick said heartily. He stood up. "You're due at the beauty shop, aren't you, Myrtle? I'll see about that rigging right now and get it out of the way." He grinned at Noel. "And I reckon you'll be keeping that important date with Keith."

Edna's hand jerked and her purse fell to the floor. She bent to pick it up but not before Noel had a glimpse of the stricken expression in her eyes. Then it *was* Keith who meant so much to Edna Carleton.

CHAPTER IV

The Love Brand

RELIEF so strong that it made her almost light-headed swept through Noel. No matter about that scene at Santa Maria ranch. Edna might have been making a desperate play for Bruce to rouse Keith's jealousy. She might even have been seeking comfort and help from Bruce. It was, Noel remembered now with lightning clarity, after Edna's visit that Bruce had sought her out—to make sure, he'd said, that she was serious about staying West.

Spontaneously, Noel was filled with sympathy for the other girl. She smiled warmly at her when she straightened with her purse in her hand. But Edna didn't return the smile. Stark hostility blazed from her eyes for a revealing second. Then she snapped open her purse, was powdering her face.

Outside the cafe, Myrtle left them to hurry across the street to the hotel beauty shop. Edna remarked in a rather strained voice that she believed Bruce would like her advice about a saddle he meant to buy.

"Wait," Noel said quickly. She groped for words and said with artificial gaiety, "I want to look around a bit. I just adore poking about the shops by myself." She looked down the wide street. "Isn't that the custom house? And those are curio shops we can see on each side of the street over there in Mexico?" She finished breathlessly, "I don't need any papers or anything to cross the line, do I?"

"No," Edna replied curtly. "They'll just ask your nationality. But you can't go across today. Bruce told me to tell you folks that he had a private tip there was going to be plenty of election day gun trouble in Nogales."

Her blue-gray eyes looked glad that Noel would have to postpone her shopping trip.

"Gun trouble?" Noel asked incredulously.

She stared down the dusty street. The Mexican half of the city drowsed serenely in the hot afternoon sun.

"Sure," Edna asserted, not even trying to keep the spite out of her voice. "You'd better play safe and stay on this side. Especially since you're a ten—a stranger here."

Noel flushed. Of course she had heard of how hot-headed Mexicans could get over political controversies. But guns, shooting? She refused to believe there would be anything so violent. She looked challengingly at Edna. The other girl's eyes were openly scornful, her red lips curved in derision at Noel's confusion.

Noel's chin came up sharply. She remembered what Bobby had repeated about Edna's promise to scare the socks off that red-headed dude.

"Besides," Edna was saying, and all her mockery and unfriendliness couldn't keep the hurt out of her voice, "I thought you had a date—with Keith McGowan."

"I changed my mind, Edna," Noel observed

quietly, "about meeting Keith. Listen, if you happen to be going that way, will you stop into Silver's jewelry shop and tell him that? I'd hate to have him waiting there."

Trying to be casual, she straightened one of her beige gloves.

"Wh-why," Edna stammered in her surprise, "I'll tell Keith, of course. You—you changed your mind."

"Thank you," Noel smiled at her. "And I'll meet you all at the Plaza later."

And, she thought, I'll be loaded down with all the Mexican trinkets I choose to buy across the line. So you can see, Miss Belle-of-the-Valley, how easy I scare. What fun Edna could have had, telling how she'd bluffed the red-headed tenderfoot into missing her shopping trip.

IT was amazingly easy to cross into Mexico. The handsome young Customs' Officer simply nodded her by.

Confidently, Noel walked into the first shop she came to. It seemed deserted, was dim and silent. Siesta time, of course.

With a vague uneasiness, she walked out and down the street, and into a larger store. Silent and empty, too. Annoyance and frustration began to crumble her confidence.

Suddenly, the silence was shattered by the sound of running footsteps outside. Noel went to the door and peered out. A barefoot peon, ragged, gasping for breath, darted by, disappeared into an alley. Immediately three mounted soldiers appeared from around the building and galloped down the dusty road.

"Viva Mexico!" one of them yelled, and pulling up a gun shot into the air.

Instantly the street swarmed with soldiers. Gunfire and shouts filled the square, invaded the quiet peacefulness of the scene.

Overwhelmed with alarm, Noel shrank back into the shop and flattened herself against a Navajo rug hanging on the wall. Her eyes were wide and dark in her face, and her heart hammered, it seemed, down into the very pit of her stomach.

The serape over the door leading to the back of the shop lifted, and Noel's heart stopped beating. A man so tall that he had to bend his head stepped through the doorway. In the gloom she could not see his face, only a large Stetson hat and wide shoulders silhouetted against the shadowy background.

"Bruce, oh Bruce!"

Her faint cry was a prayer.

It was Bruce. He took her arm and hurried her out the back of the shop. They crossed a deserted patio, sped down a back street, around a corner, and then miraculously they were passing the two custom houses. From afar, through the roaring in her ears, it seemed she could still hear the scattered crackle of rifle fire.

Gently, Bruce drew her into the shade of a crumbling adobe wall. A rose-flowered oleander tree shut them into a small, fragrant world. Noel, trembling so that she could hardly stand, looked up at him. His face was the color of pallor under suntan.

"Was—was that what happens on election day here?" she asked blankly.

"Yes," he replied grimly. "These people take their politics seriously—and violently. And stray shots don't care who they hit." He braced his hands on the wall on either side of her. "Rosita's father saw you go across," he explained harshly, "and ran to tell me." His hands left the wall to close on her shoulders. "Didn't Edna tell you folks what I said about going into Mexico today?"

"I th-thought she was trying to frighten me," Noel faltered. "I thought it was a joke."

"Joke," repeated Bruce almost helplessly. "Anyhow," he said abruptly. "I thought Keith was buying you a ring today."

"I sent Edna," Noel murmured faintly, but steadily, "in my place." She gathered up her ragged confidence, and cried with a rush. "They love each other. And anyone but—but—a stubborn, ornery blind, one-track mind rancher would see that and quit throwing me at Keith's head!"

Sudden hot tears brimmed over her lashes, and she shook her head angrily to clear her eyes.

"I was kind of worried about Edna," Bruce was saying. Then, softly, "I notice that when I went into that shop after you, you didn't call for Keith, but for me. Why?"

"Maybe," replied Noel, lifting her chin and giving him the full benefit of the violet lightning of her eyes, "for the same reason that Rosita's father went after *you* instead of Keith." She whirled away from him and sobbed, "And if everything's clear now I'm going away. I'm going back where I savvy what's going on, back to my own c-corral!"

Swiftly, wonderfully, Bruce's arms closed around her. He turned her so that her cheek rested over his heart.

"Listen, darling," he whispered softly, "it's too late. You already got your brand on me for keeps."

"Please, Nancy, don't tell anyone what you saw," pleaded Buck

Courted by two, Nancy Burton lets her heart decide!

Daughter Knows Best

By MARY MacLEOD

NANCY BURTON hurried to the front door of the Flying B ranchhouse as old Ed Carson came up the steps of the porch. The ranch cook was carrying a big flat package he had brought back with him when he had gone to town for supplies.

"Is that for me, Ed?" Nancy asked eagerly as she stepped out onto the porch. "I've been expecting a package from New York."

"It's for you, all right, Nancy," said Carson. "And it shore comes from New York. Seth Andrew and the rest of that bunch that hangs

around the post office in Festival shore racked their brains trying to figger what was in that package."

"They could never guess," said Nancy, as she took the package. "It's a surprise."

"You tell me when it's time for me to be amazed," said Carson dryly as he turned away. "I ain't got time to be curious right now."

Nancy smiled. The old cook pretended to be a grouch but she knew there wasn't anyone more loyal and kind-hearted than Ed Carson when somebody needed his help. He had been her friend ever since she had been a little girl, growing up on her father's Flying B ranch. Now that she was twenty, slender, dark-haired and—in her own eyes—she was quite mature, Ed Carson still treated her as though she was a nice child.

Smiling, she carried the package up to her room. She had sent to one of the smart Fifth Avenue shops for the riding outfit that she was sure was in the package. Nancy placed the long paper wrapped cardboard box on her bed and quickly opened it.

"But I ordered tan," she exclaimed as she drew out a bright green vest and green riding breeches. "I'll look like a Christmas tree waiting to be decorated in this outfit." She put the vest and breeches aside, and looked in the box again. She drew out a yellow silk shirt, a brown neckerchief and shiny black riding boots.

"This is really something," Nancy murmured as she looked at her new apparel. "I'll bet that Buck Ward will be impressed when he sees me dressed in this."

She took off her gray flannel skirt, worn levis, and scuffed little cowboy boots and quickly put on the new clothes. Then she surveyed herself in the mirror and blinked. Those new clothes made her look quite smart, but the colors were awfully bright.

"Nancy! Nancy, where in blue blazes are you?"

It was her father roaring around downstairs, shouting for her as he always did when he came home and did not find his daughter where he could see her the moment he arrived. At times he reminded her of a big shaggy dog whose bark was much worse than his bite. Ben Burton adored his motherless girl.

"I'm up in my room, Dad," Nancy called to him. "I'll be right there."

SHE took a last look at herself in the glass and then hurried down the stairs into the big living room. The owner of the Flying B was standing looking out the window, and did not see her enter.

"What's wrong, Dad?" asked Nancy.

Ben Burton turned and looked at her. She was standing in the bright sunlight that gleamed in through one of the windows. Burton's mouth opened and closed like that of a fish. For once in his life the ranch owner was speechless. He didn't stay that way long.

"Ain't you happy here at home, Daughter?" he asked anxiously.

"Of course, Dad," said Nancy in surprise. "Why do you ask that?"

"Figgered you must be aimin' to run away and join a circus or you wouldn't be wearin' a rig like that," Burton said. "Or maybe yuh're goin' to a masquerade, or something?"

"This is my new riding outfit. You gave me the money so I could send to New York for it. Don't you remember, Dad?"

"I remember yuh sayin' you needed a new riding outfit." Burton nodded. "But I didn't know it would look like that." He sighed. "Reckon I'll get used to it in time. 'Sides I got somethin' more serious to talk to you about, Daughter."

"What is it?" Nancy asked as her father dropped into his favorite chair and she seated herself near him. "You sound troubled."

"I am. I'm worried about you and Buck Ward and Jim Lawrence. I just got back from town. Had to tend to some business at the bank so I rode in early this mornin' before you were up."

"I know," said Nancy. "Buck told me you had gone. I spoke to him before he rode out on the range with the boys to start the Spring roundup. What about Buck and Jim?"

"Had a talk with Jim while I was in town," said Burton slowly. "He's doin' right well since he bought the general store. Reckon that business has been right good these last two years." The big, middle-aged rancher cast a quick glance at his daughter. "Jim wants to marry you, Nancy. Told me so this morning."

"Isn't that nice," snapped Nancy in sudden anger. "And why hasn't he asked me about it first? He's never even made any attempt to tell me he loves me—but he tells you he wants to marry me!"

"Shucks, maybe Jim is old fashioned." Burton was grinning. "Looks like he figgers he has to get her parent's consent before he can go courtin' a girl."

"Well, I don't like it," said Nancy. "Besides I think Buck Ward is much nicer than Jim Lawrence. When he is in love with a girl he doesn't keep it a secret."

"I've been afraid of that." Ben Burton frowned. "Just don't seem like Buck is the right man for you, Nancy."

"He must be a good man or you wouldn't have made him foreman of this outfit," protested Nancy. "He gets along fine with the rest of the boys."

"Shore. But just because I make a man foreman that don't prove I want him to marry my daughter. If you ask me Jim is a

mite older than Buck and has more hoss sense."

"We won't argue about it now, Dad." Nancy smiled and got to her feet. "Don't worry. I haven't made up my mind about either one of them yet. When I do I'll tell you. I'm going for a ride now."

"Don't get too close to the cattle," said Burton with a grin. "Reckon the boys are havin' enough trouble rounding up the stock without you scaring the critters to death."

"You're just jealous because you haven't a shirt as green as the color of my outfit," said Nancy.

Half an hour later she was riding her sorrel mare eastward across the range. She didn't have any particular destination in view, but she felt she just might find Buck Ward around if she rode in that direction. He had told her he would be working in the east forty when he left that morning.

It was noon when she finally found him. She topped a rise and looked down toward the foot of the hill. Below she could see two horsemen facing each other as they talked. Even from the distance she recognized Buck as he sat tall in the saddle. Then it dawned on her the other man was Jim Lawrence.

Nancy halted her horse and sat watching them. They talked for a few minutes longer and finally Buck drew his gun and handed it to Lawrence butt first. The store-keeper took the Colt and thrust it into his belt. He nodded and then wheeled his horse and rode away. Buck sat in the saddle watching Jim's departure.

"Now what was that all about?" exclaimed Nancy. "Guess I'll go find out."

BUCK glanced over his shoulder as he heard the pounding of the mare's hoofs. He swung out of the saddle, ground-hitching his horse. He stood waiting until Nancy rode closer and dismounted, letting her own reins drag.

"Aren't you somethin' in that get-up," exclaimed Buck in admiration. "So that's the outfit you been expectin' from New York."

"That's right." Nancy smiled. "Do you like it, Buck?"

"Shore, I like it just fine," he said with a grin. "The colors are kind of subdued alongside of a rainbow, but I always did like quiet things."

"I'm puzzled, Buck." Nancy changed the subject abruptly. "I saw you talking to Jim Lawrence a few minutes ago. Why did you give him your gun? It was the one with pearl handles and your initials inlaid in silver on them wasn't it?"

"It was," said Buck. "But I'd rather not talk about that. And I'm askin' you not to tell anyone you saw me give Jim that gun. Not even yore dad."

"But why, Buck?"

"I just told you I didn't want to talk about it."

He stepped closer and then she found herself held tightly in his strong arms. A rosy, radiant haze seemed to steal over the world as their lips met. It was the first time Buck had ever kissed her, and in that moment Nancy knew this man was the only one she could ever love.

"I'm sorry, Nancy honey," he said as he finally released her. "Reckon I had no right to do that."

"Buck Ward, don't you know telling a girl you're sorry you kissed her is practically fatal?" demanded Nancy, her eyes shining. "That's a deadly insult to her vanity."

"Don't reckon I'm sorry, at that." Buck laughed then grabbed her and kissed her again. "Will you marry me, darlin'?"

"Probably," said Nancy as she drew away from him. "But Dad won't like it."

As some of the Flying B waddies loomed into view driving cattle out of the brush Nancy got her horse and rode away. Buck mounted his roan and joined the men.

Late that afternoon just as it was growing dark the tired men of the outfit rode in off the range. They were washing up for supper when a posse from town led by Sheriff Matt Davis appeared at the Flying B. Nancy saw that Jim Lawrence was riding with the posse.

"A lone bandit held up and robbed the bank in Festival this afternoon," announced the sheriff. "He killed one of my deputies and got away. He was using two guns, but he dropped one of them." The old lawman produced a pearl handled Colt. "This is the gun the killer dropped, and it's got Buck Ward's initials on it!"

"I didn't rob the bank," protested Buck as he stood listening with the rest of the Flying B outfit. "I been out on the range all day long and didn't go near town."

"Can you prove it, Ward?" demanded Sheriff Davis. "Where were you from two to four this afternoon?"

"Out on the range, like I said." Buck glared at Jim Lawrence. "So that's why you were willin' to take my gun, Lawrence. So you could rob the bank and frame me with it."

"You're talkin' wild," said Lawrence calmly. "I didn't take yore gun. Why would I do a thing like that?"

"I gave you that gun this morning out on the range," insisted Buck. "You know that."

"No, yuh didn't," said Lawrence. "It sounds plumb crazy to me."

"Me, too," said the owner of the Flying B as Burton listened with the others. "Sounds like yuh're lyin', Buck." He glanced at the rest of his men. "Did any of you see Ward

between two and four this afternoon?"

"I didn't," said one of the waddies. "And I reckon that goes for the rest of the boys. Buck told us he was goin' to ride over to the line cabin and check up things there, but that ain't really sayin' where he really did go."

"Reckon I'll have to place you under arrest until we get the right of this, Ward," said the sheriff. "Personally yuh don't strike me as the kind of a jigger who would rob a bank, but law is law. And the bank robber did drop yore gun."

"I been thinkin' about that gun, Sheriff," said old Ed Carson, as the ranch cook stepped forward. "I was in a poker game with Jim and Buck in town a few nights ago. Buck lost to Jim, and was plumb out of money. Buck offered to put up his fancy gun for more chips—"

LAWRENCE interrupted Carson. "That just shows how smart Ward is," he said. "He wanted me to take that gun, then he would buy it back the next day, and when he dropped it at the scene of the holdup folks would remember I had that Colt."

"And you refused to take it?" asked Sheriff Davis.

"He did," went on Carson. "Jim told Buck he would take his I. O. U. instead, but if Buck didn't pay up in two or three days Jim would take the gun in payment. So Jim got the I. O. U. when Buck lost."

Nancy had been watching Jim Lawrence as she listened tensely.

Her eyes narrowed as she stared at the store-keeper's saddle.

"How much money was stolen from the bank, Sheriff?" Nancy asked.

"About ten thousand dollars," said the sheriff. "Why are yuh askin', Miss Burton? We ain't found the money yet. Reckon Ward hid it somewhere."

"No, he didn't," said Nancy. "Buck didn't rob the bank. I saw him give his gun to Jim Lawrence out on the range this morning. Buck hasn't been lying about that."

"I thought that gun business was small stuff for Lawrence, the way he has been gambling every night for the last month and losing all the time," said the sheriff. "Could be that he was so broke he got desperate and decided to rob the bank and try to frame Ward with it."

"That's a lie!" snapped Jim Lawrence. "You haven't got any proof that I robbed any bank."

"I've been wondering about one thing, Sheriff," said Nancy. "Why would a store-keeper have a saddle roll attached to his kak. Even a waddy doesn't carry one unless he is going to make a trip somewhere."

"That's right," exclaimed Sheriff Davis. "Let's see what you've got in that saddle roll, Lawrence."

Nancy moved swiftly as Lawrence reached for his gun. The neckerchief she was wearing came loose as a breeze caught it. It went fluttering through the air just as Lawrence aimed his gun at Buck. Jim's horse bucked wildly and the store-keeper's shot went wild.

Buck leaped forward as Lawrence was thrown out of the saddle. In a moment the two men were fighting desperately on the ground. A waddy caught Lawrence's horse by the reins, and got the animal calmed down.

Some of the other men started forward to break up the fight but the sheriff stopped them.

"Let them finish it," ordered Matt Davis, as he searched through Lawrence's saddle roll and found the bank money. "Reckon Buck owes him a good lickin' after the way Lawrence tried to frame him."

Buck pounded at the store-keeper until he finally knocked Lawrence out. It had been a fair fight, for both men were the same size and Jim had not been hurt by his fall from his horse.

LATER in the evening when the sheriff's posse had taken away their prisoner and the ranch had quieted down, Nancy found herself alone with the foreman.

"I still don't quite understand why you didn't want me to tell anyone I had seen you give your gun to Jim," Nancy said.

"Because I was ashamed to let you know I had really lost that gun to Lawrence in a poker game," said Buck. "I hadn't been able to pay him that I. O. U. because I got my money all tied up in somethin' special so I figgered he had a right to my gun when he asked for it this morning."

They were sitting on a bench just below the window of Ben Burton's bedroom. The ranch owner had retired for the night. They were both feeling quite happy and their voices and laughter was louder than they realized.

"Will you marry me, Nancy?" Buck demanded. "I've been savin' my pay and bought a little spread over north of here. That's the reason why I didn't have any money left to pay off gamblin' debts. How about it?"

"Nancy!" roared Ben Burton from the window above them before she could answer Buck. "Tell the man you'll marry him and both of you shut up. I want to get some sleep!"

Nancy looked at Buck and nodded, her face radiant in the moonlight. When Buck kissed her she was sure they were not making enough noise to keep her father awake.

"Ho, Rosita," called Eduardo, cheerfully

Honeymoon Roundup

By BARRY STORM

Rosita uses a clever ruse to confound her bandido foes

ROSITA moved over the gravel by the murky, ever-flowing river, and stepped out of her shoes. She was happier then than she had ever been before in all of her eighteen years. Hadn't she this day married Eduardo and escaped José!

It mattered not that José's was the autocratic power of Pitiquito and his business extended, some said darkly, even to *bandidos* in the badlands. Nor did it matter that Eduardo was a simple rancher of horses there. Rosita would help him become a great *caballero* one day just as she had ridden with him after wild animals to pay for furnishings in Eduardo's brown adobe *casa*.

"Hai! Our honeymoon roundup," she told herself joyously. She stripped off bright plaid blouse and riding skirt and splashed gaily into the water. She was like a slender sprite, with long hair blowing.

Rosita ducked herself and scrubbed the dust of riding from her face. Then she stood up with widespread legs braced against the surge of the current, the wet, smooth curves of her body shining boldly in the flaming sunset light. She splashed water upon herself and shivered delightedly with the coldness of it. Then, suddenly, like a chill wind blowing, that coldness brought back memory of José who had seen her in Pitiquito that morning.

He had paused there on the one dusty street while Eduardo had kissed her while they stood upon the steps of the little white mission. Then they had gone around behind after their horses. Very casually, José had strolled by.

"Ha, Rosita! So you married him after all," he had said with sneering politeness. "How can that be, when I could have given you everything."

"But I love him," she had retorted. "And one day—"

"Quien sabe? One day he might die," snarled José, passing on.

The very vindictiveness of it had left Rosita shivering, as shivering now she splashed ashore hastily and dressed. She was in a panic of fear that grew with each passing moment.

She went almost at a run back up the steep-walled arroyo which climbed from the river toward Eduardo's hut. All at once, from the uneasy whisper of some vague sound, she recognized the faint stomping of horses and the leathery squeak of saddle gear.

Rosita halted abruptly. She knew then that this was the source of her intuitive terror. She was aware that she had been hearing the alien noise all along. They were like a tenuous voice plucking at the strings of her memory.

In frantic haste she found a lone, flood-twisted palo verde and climbed up painfully through its thorny, scratching branches. At last she saw over the arroyo's gravelly edge, the group of saddled horses tethered to a distant clump of mesquites beyond.

Only reckless men who might have desperate need for speed would use such horseflesh in the roughness of the *barrancas*—only *bandidos!* And wasn't that José's silver-mounted saddle upon one of those animals!

Suddenly Rosita divined the terrible meaning of José's words. She knew now that those bandits would kill Eduardo in an apparently chance raid. In overwhelming panic she came down out of the tree and went flying up the arroyo. But finally when she came to the blind head of it, and the barbed-wire strands which pocketed in the wild, still-milling horses there, she saw Eduardo safely climbing the steep path to the hut above.

"Eduardo! Eduardo!" she cried, panting between the words. "*Bandidos!*—their horses —here!"

She shivered for they might be within hearing even then.

EDUARDO turned, tall and straight in the black velvet trousers and sateen shirt he had donned for this day. His teeth flashed white.

"Ho, Rosita," he called. "It is the joke that all day you ride after horses and then would give them to *bandidos.*"

In that instant a shot crashed out through the desert stillness.

Rosita heard the sullen whine of the bullet overhead—saw dust spurt up near Eduardo's feet. In the corral the horses reared and milled excitedly.

Eduardo's grin froze suddenly and he started down after Rosita.

"It is the horses they want," he shouted. "But I will fight from the *casa.*"

The hut standing above on top of the knoll into which the arroyo headed had been built for just such a purpose in the long ago, by Eduardo's grandfather. Its thick adobe walls, pierced on three sides only by rifle slits, presented an almost impregnable front to the barren slopes beyond. Only from the fourth side, with its door commanding the corral below, could a bullet be fired into the interior.

"Turn back," Rosita cried fearfully, while she plunged breathlessly up the path.

Then other shots rang out from some distant point, awakening resounding echoes. They excited the horses into wild trotting up to the barbed-wire strands that stretched across the arroyo and back around the sheer, flood-cut walls which hemmed them in. Suddenly scant yards away, Eduardo stumbled and sat down hard.

"Eduardo!" screamed Rosita. She fairly leaped over the distance between and then stood deliberately shielding him with her body. But the shooting stopped as suddenly as it had begun. She knew with sinking heart, that José was indeed out there directing the bandits.

"My thigh," groaned Eduardo through his teeth. "But into the *casa.* I will follow—"

"It is I who shall follow," cried Rosita. She helped him, limping, on up the path and into the hut's cool and dim interior.

Rosita caught a glimpse of furtive figures moving toward the arroyo further down, while she closed the heavy plank door. Then Eduardo had taken down his rifle from the deerhorn rack and was watching outside.

"They're in the arroyo," he said presently, and thrust his rifle barrel through the slightly ajar door. Then suddenly he had to lay a heavy hand against the wall to keep himself upright.

Rosita looked at him and saw that he was standing at his post by sheer will power alone. His features had become pasty white and there was blood seeping down onto his boot.

"Eduardo! What are we to do?" she cried in a sudden agony of terror. Then he collapsed in a dead faint, his gun clattering down upon the packed dirt floor.

Instantly Rosita was down on her knees, half-sobbing and half-pleading, "Eduardo! Beloved! Speak to me."

All at once the fear and hate and baffled anger within her fused into ruthless inspiration. Frantically she tore away the sleeve of his shirt and made a makeshift bandage, to halt the flow of blood.

She was on her feet again then, snatching a towel from behind the stove. She opened the door a little, and waved the white cloth. Far down the arroyo the indistinct moving figures of the bandits froze into watchful immobility.

In that ominous silence Rosita squeezed through the door reluctantly as though she were being urged from within, and made her way with consummate artlessness down the steep path to the crooked mesquite post at the bottom, around which one end of the barbed-wire strands were wrapped.

If only Eduardo had not been wounded, she

thought then while the noise of the milling, rearing horses filled her ears. If only she could saddle two of those animals and flee with him. But she knew that two or the whole wild herd of them would stampede if they were released from the improvised corral.

It was the noise of those animals that covered the creeping advance of one of the bandits who had started upcanyon at the first sight of her, his rifle at the ready.

Rosita caught a metallic glint from that gun, then saw the bandit spring up a scant hundred yards away. A wild panic swept like a splashing red wave over her mind. Instinctively she sprang for the crooked mesquite post. But she knew she was too late. Indeed, she was trapped, for the bandit's rifle was levelled upon her. There was no mercy in his hard, swarthy features.

Slowly Rosita raised her hands, her mind desperately considering a dozen ruses as though it were some detached part of herself. If only she could gain a few minutes time. That was it, she must play for time. She went smiling to the bandit as though this were an everyday occurrence, her heart like a hard, choking mass in her throat.

"I have come to negotiate," she said. "Eduardo has boxes of cartridges, so it would be silly to fight on for days."

"*Dios!*" exclaimed the bandit sharply. "Why isn't one informed?"

He waved her ahead of him with his rifle barrel and herded her helplessly down the arroyo to the whole infamous group. There, Rosita saw, was José himself. She fairly shivered in sheer terror.

"She speaks of many cartridges in the *casa* and of a desire to negotiate," said the bandit to the others. "Already we have one prisoner for ransom," he added with a broad wink in José's direction.

"*Si*, Rosita," said José with oily smoothness. "It is all so unfortunate. I, too, am a prisoner as you can see. They will hold us in some cave in the *barrancas*."

He spread his hands open before him as though it were a detestable truth, and leered down at her with gleaming, piglike eyes.

BUT Rosita knew that he lied, knew that if he so much as guessed that both she and Eduardo were helpless, it would be the end. She tried desperately to think but her mind was a whirling blank. Again she shivered all over as though she were standing in a chill wind.

"But do not fear so," came José's oily voice. "Perhaps after a time, I can ransom us both."

"But, yes, after much time for the hue and cry to die," said one of the bandits. The man had coarse, flabby features. "You two should pass it pleasantly enough." Then all of them broke into rough, boisterous laughter.

Rosita felt the ground reel about her then as though the whole world were being shaken in some giant hand. Strangely, the leering faces of the bandits seemed to hem her in. All that she could think of was that she was trapped, that she would never escape José, that Eduardo would be ruthlessly murdered.

Then the thought of him lying helpless in the cabin suddenly shocked her mind from the red whirl of panic that was freezing her blood. She caught onto José's words like a sinking swimmer clutching at a log.

"Ransom, ransom," she repeated, and her mind began to funtion again. "But that is what I came to negotiate." Inspiration flooded her brain like the distant sunset light.

"A bag of gold. From Eduardo's last roundup. A large bag from the sale of many horses. He sent me to offer it to the *bandidos* if they would leave. But perhaps for so much gold they would also release you." And after the tumbling words, Rosita turned her most artless expression upon José. "It is our honeymoon, this night."

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten," lied José smoothly. "You would bring this gold back here yourself if these ruffians agree to leave?"

José turned to one of them in feigned concern, and Rosita did not miss the almost imperceptable nod he gave. "Then may I also go free?" he asked with assumed meekness.

"*'Sta bueno.* It is agreed," said the one with coarse, flabby features. He tilted his high, peaked sombrero back to a rakish angle. "After all, one gold piece in the hand—"

"And you will never return?" asked Rosita naively, and with the same artless expression.

"Ah ha, we shall not need to," he said. "For that will be everything we want." He grinned at his own subtlety.

Even José was grinning now.

"I shall remain for hostage," he said. "But make all possible haste."

"I will get the gold from Eduardo then and tell him the good news," Rosita cried.

She fairly flew back up between the steep walls of the arroyo and straight to the crooked mesquite post at the bottom of the trail. Then suddenly, with the noise of the wild, still-milling horses filling her ears, she stopped there and frantically tore at the wound ends of the barbed-wire strands.

In a moment, she had the top strand down, though her hands had become torn and bleeding from the barbs. Then a shout went up from the bandits below! The fence was down, and Rosita jumped back up onto the trail above just in time.

The wild, excited animals, suddenly set free, poured out over the dropped wires and

(Concluded on page 107)

Branding Fire Song Book

By TEX BROWN

HOWDY, neighbors. Here we are with a little song that kinda throws a spotlight on some early history that hasn't been given much attention in the accounts of the opening up of the West.

I happen to have spent a considerable amount of time proddin' dogies in the old Oklahoma and Indian Territory, and in Texas along the Oklahoma border, so I got a chance pretty often to see the workin' out of some mighty interestin' cowboy romance. But I reckon that about the same kinda thing worked out in other sections somewhat earlier than it did in my part of the range, but maybe along the same lines.

What I'm speakin' of, is the cowpunchers and cattlemen that settled the West, startin' out by fightin' Indians, but sometimes endin' up marryin' 'em.

The Indians Weren't as Wild as They Were Painted

When I was a young kid, there was a kind of story that folks read a whole lot, in which the Indians was made to look like mighty savage hombres, and the whites was made to look like angels on horseback. It made excitin' readin', but most folks know now that this ain't entirely true.

Naturally there was some Indians that resented the white man comin' into the country and ruinin' his huntin', which was what he depended on for a livin'. But there was other kind of Indians, too.

Take along the east part of Texas, as one example. The native Indians there wasn't hunters and warriors at all, but was people that raised crops and cattle, just like the whites done. The white folks liked them and got along with them fine.

Here's the Way Romance Developed

Sometimes a young puncher would be workin' cattle around the country when he'd meet some pretty young Indian gal, and would fall in love with her. Then next thing you know, he'd done spoke to her father, and there was a big Indian marriage.

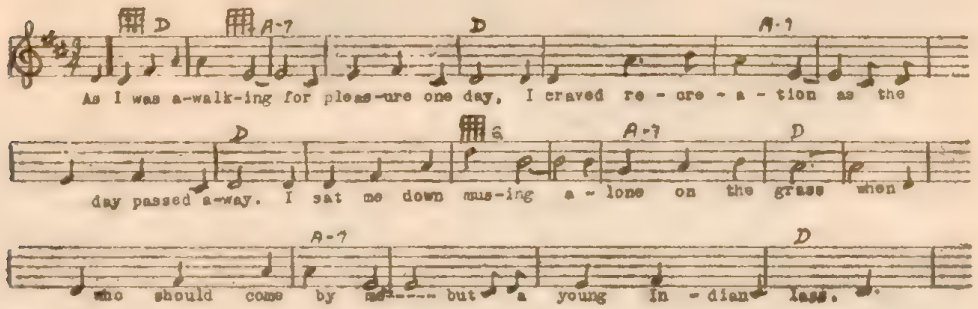
Then they'd settle down somewhere and start a little spread of their own, raisin' stock and some mighty handsome young children, which had all the best qualities of the white race and the Indian race combined.

These young people, who was true sons and daughters of the range made mighty fine young citizens who contributed a whole lot to the growth of the country.

There ain't a day that I don't see and talk to friends who has Indian and white blood in their veins, and who ain't proud of both. For, after all, this is a country that belongs to the folks that made it what it is, and it took a lot of people of all races to make it just that.

So, let's tune up and sing about one pretty Indian gal!

THE LITTLE MOHEE



2.

She came and sat by me, and taking my hand,
Said you look like a stranger, not one of our band.
But if you will rise sir, and come with me,
I'll teach you the language of the little Mohee.

3.

Said I, No, fair maiden, that never can be,
For I've a true love in my own country.
And I'll not forsake her, for I know she loves me,
And is just as faithful as the little Mohee.

4.

She said, When you return, sir, to the land that you know,
Remember the maiden where the blue waters flow.
And the last time I saw her she waved her brown hand,
As I rode on past her, to my own native land.

5.

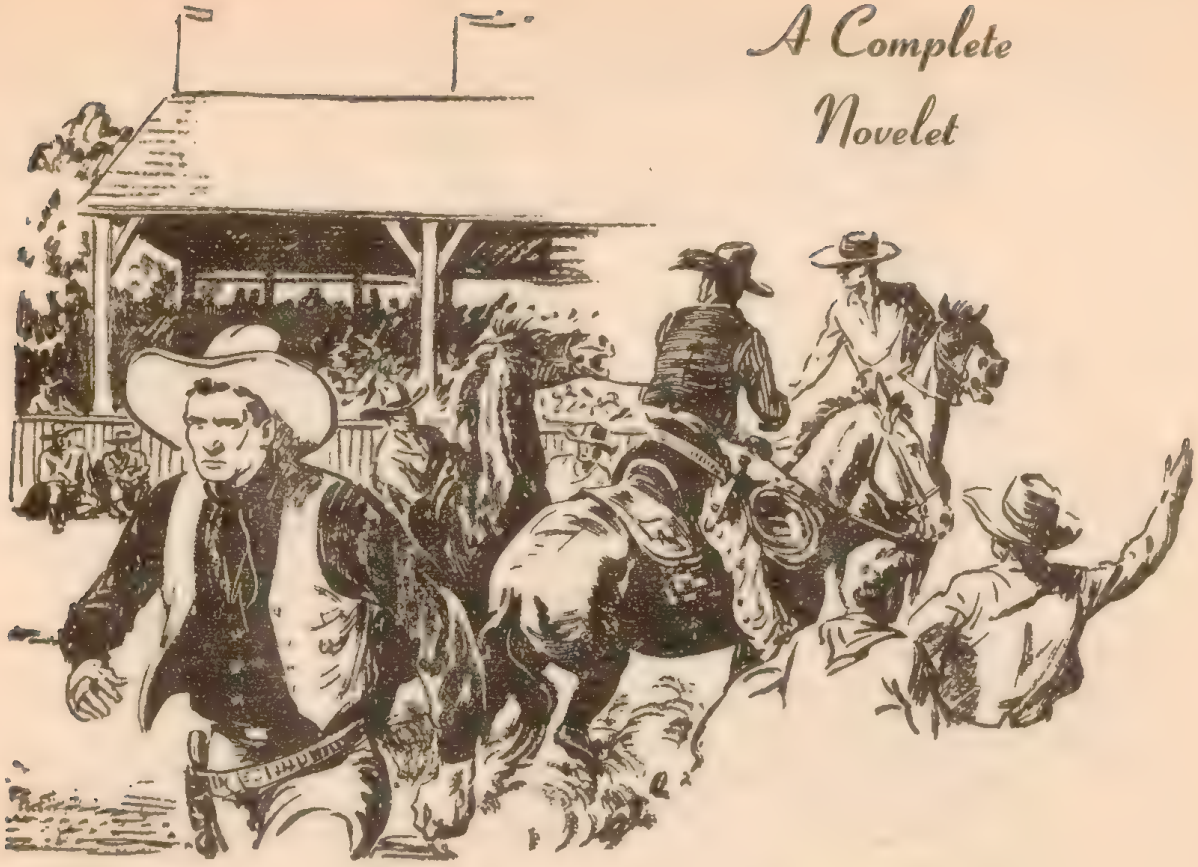
And now that I'm home on my own range once more,
With friends and relations all around me galore,
But of all who surround me not one can I see
Who really compares with my little Mohee.

6.

And the girl that I trusted proved untrue to me,
So I said I'll turn backward to my little Mohee.
I'll set my course westward and away I will flee,
Spend the rest of my days with my little Mohee!

Again Cherry felt strong firm hands on her rounded shoulders, and the thrill that went through her told her the hands were Wayne Cary's

A Complete Novelet



Hollywood Cowboy

By CHUCK MARTIN

Queen Cherry Caruthers of the Shoshone Rodeo finds herself in an emotional tangle when intrigue and jealousy enter the main events and conspire against the happiness of her heart!

CHAPTER I

Side Bet

CHERRY CARUTHERS reined her palomino stallion to a stop when a polite masculine voice addressed her by her regal title. In his tone there was none of the good-natured banter with which the other rodeo contestants favored their pretty ruler.

"Pardon me, Queen Cherry, but isn't your Selim horse a pink-skinned palomino?"

Cherry felt a wave of friendly warmth for the speaker even before she turned her curly blond head to give him a close scrutiny. Even in cow country where good horses were the rule, there were few who knew the difference between the skin pigments of palominos. To most of them, a palomino was just a horse with a white tail and mane.

Cherry's wide blue eyes saw a tall smiling cowboy sitting a roping saddle on a chunky quarter horse. He wore a gray flannel shirt open at the neck, faded denim overalls tucked down into worn high-heeled boots, with regulation blunted spurs. He might have passed for a working cowboy

from one of nearby ranches except for the expensive San Ana Stetson, and the tailored haircut under the hat.

"Yes, Selim is pink-skinned," Cherry answered with a smile which showed the deep dimples in her cheeks. "Aren't you Wayne Cary from Hollywood?"

"Yes'm," the cowboy answered, and a flush spread across his smooth tanned face. "But I'm not a Hollywood cowboy," he added quickly. "I mean, not really."

He was trying to explain when he was interrupted by another cowboy who rode his big horse squarely between Cary and Cherry. The girl recognized him instantly—Ralph Butler.

"Howdy, Queenie," Ralph greeted Cherry with the familiarity of an old friend. "Is this wolf giving you any trouble?"

"Wolf?" Cherry echoed, and there was no smile on her face when she turned to the big Butler. "Oh, I think I understand," she said calmly. "Wayne Cary, may I present Ralph Butler, the champion calf-roper and saddle-bronc rider of the Shoshone Rodeo?"

"I'm glad to know you officially, Butler," Cary ackknowledged the introduction, but Butler scowled and shrugged one big shoulder.

"I know that Hollywood cowboy," he said bluntly. "He's a fair hand with the twine, but our bucking stock is too rough for such as him. Better forfeit your entry fee, picture-man!"

WAYNE CARY'S lips tightened as the color stained his handsome face. He knew that most of the rodeo contestants would willingly pay an agent half of their earnings for the chance to play in pictures, and that most of them suffered from an acute case of sour grapes.

"The rougher they are, the higher a bronc rider will mark in the scoring," he answered Butler. "I'll ride what I draw."

"Or have it done," Butler corrected roughly. "Did you bring your stand-in with you?"

Cherry Caruthers watched the two men and listened with her head tilted pertly. Cowboys were forever hazing each other as part of the game they played, but there was a difference here. They usually accorded each other respect, and it was evident that Ralph Butler had little respect for Wayne Cary.

The two men were almost of a size—about six feet tall. Both had wide shoulders and lean hips. But even in his contesting clothes, Wayne Cary appeared well-groomed while Butler, on the other hand, wore expensive rodeo rigging which looked as though he had slept in it. His haircut was of the soup-bowl variety, and his gray eyes held a perpetual challenge.

"No stand-in," Cary answered quietly. "I might make the circuit this season, and try for the championship."

"Naw!" Butler sneered, and threw back his big head to laugh loudly. "Now you take me. I was thinking about crashing Hollywood to show the dudes how a real cowboy works."

"I don't want you to show me," Cary answered, with a hum of anger in his deep voice. "A man can learn most anything if he puts his mind to it, and that goes for cowboying as well as making moving pictures."

Cherry Caruthers studied the two with a glow of interest in her blue eyes. Her father owned the C Bar C cattle ranch, but Cherry was as modern as her unlimited opportunities for acquiring "know-how" could make her. She was just twenty-one, five-feet-two, and had been told that she was decidedly photogenic. Though no one in Shoshone except her father, Charley Caruthers, knew that Cherry had passed a successful screen test, and had turned down an attractive offer to play in pictures because she preferred life on the C Bar C.

She told herself that the chief difference between these two men before her now was that Wayne Cary had acquired the polish of the all-around man. He was proficient in sports, and his association with people of the world had given him poise.

Ralph Butler was only a local champion, but he had bought a small ranch near Shoshone with his rodeo winnings. He had lived in Shoshone two years but he never had spoken to anyone of his past. He was handsome in a rugged way, boisterous in behavior, and a little on the rough side. Though Cherry did have to admit to herself that he was a good dancer. But he certainly could ride the big rough saddle bronc, and he was more than average fast with lariat and piggin' string.

"A man has to be born a cowboy to make a tophand," she heard Butler answering Wayne Cary shortly. "That's for why the pictures Hollywood turns out never seem real. How many of these dudes can really

ride a bucking horse?"

"I can name a dozen off-hand," Cary answered quietly.

"How about Wayne Cary?" Butler asked sharply. "Was he born a cowboy?"

"Present company is always excepted," Cary countered with a smile, and he turned to Cherry. "Are you going to the dance tonight, Cherry?"

"She is, and I'm taking her," Ralph answered before Cherry could speak. "The champ always opens the cowboys' ball with the queen!"

Cherry felt a thrill when she saw the intense light of interest which burned suddenly in the eyes of Wayne Cary. She knew what he was thinking, but Wayne put his thoughts into words for the benefit of his rival.

"You say the champ opens the ball with Queen Cherry?" he asked Ralph. "Hmm... Now I have got something to make me work harder." He gave Cherry a friendly smile. "I'll promise not to step on your toes."

Ralph stared at Wayne Cary with a scowl on his bronzed face. Then he threw back his head and laughed with a sound like sullen thunder in the low foothills.

"Hear that Hollywood cowboy?" he said to Cherry derisively. "He talks like he thought he had a chance to win the Shoshone championship this afternoon!"

"I know the judges are honest," Wayne said coolly. "They will mark the way they see, and the timers are using stop-watches. That leaves it between you and me, and five or six other good boys."

"I believe the poor dope is serious," Ralph said to Cherry. "Do you think he has a chance?"

CHERRY pouted and added fuel to the fire of rivalry. She was impressed by Wayne Cary's confidence, and she had seen many of his pictures and liked them. Besides, she knew that he was a good polo player, an expert swimmer and diver, and a trained boxer. She also knew that he weighed a hundred and seventy-five pounds —ten less than Ralph Butler.

"Seriously, I believe Wayne has a chance," she gave her studied opinion. "I've seen him rope, but I have never seen him top off the saddle broncs."

"Thank you, Miss Cherry," Wayne Cary said earnestly. "And I can really fit a ride on a sunfishing fuzzy."

"He learned that lingo around the picture lots, listening to some of those broke-down extras," Ralph scoffed.

"Cut!" Cherry said sharply. "You boys sound as if you were in rehearsal, but you better save your fight until the director says to 'Start 'em rolling'. And you both want to remember that there won't be any retakes."

"You've been reading those movie magazines, Cherry," Ralph told the Shoshone queen. "I don't need any retakes myself." He turned to Wayne with the light of battle in his twinkling gray eyes. "Do you use make-up before you lock your boots in the ox-bows?" he asked.

"In pictures, yes," Wayne answered steadily, but he wasn't smiling now. "I play any game according to the rules, and I never try to change them. Do you?"

"I don't, twice in the same place," Ralph Butler shot back.

"You would if you were in pictures," Cary said slowly. "And you'd be a natural in westerns, Butler."

"Apple polish," Butler snorted, but his face told of a secret desire.

Cherry listened, and stared at Wayne.

"I believe Ralph would photograph well," she said slowly. "With the proper make-up, he would be almost handsome."

"Cut!" Cary answered. "Butler would never stand for make-up, so that lets him out!"

"Look, Lone Ranger," Ralph interrupted, and his voice was low and freighted with warning. "I'm no prize horse or cow to be read off that away. I don't like you, or anything about you!"

"Oh, yes you do," Wayne contradicted with a smile. "You like Queen Cherry, but I'm going to open the ball with her tonight!"

"Let's you and I ride over behind the bucking chutes," Ralph suggested in a hoarse whisper. "I never fight before a lady."

"But the lady does not want to fight," Cherry tormented the angry champ. "And neither does Wayne Cary. In pictures you learn to control your temper, or you might lose your contract."

"That's right," Wayne agreed. "We can do our fighting in the arena this afternoon."

Ralph rode close to Wayne and glared at the smiling actor. His eyes were narrowed, and his teeth were clenched.

"You've paid your entry fees?" he asked hoarsely.

Wayne Cary nodded.

"In the calf-roping, the saddle bronc and bareback riding, and in the bull riding," he itemized.

"I'll bet you a hundred on the side on each event, that I beat you in every go-around!" Ralph shouted. "Talk is cheap, but it takes money to buy foundation stock, which is what I'm doing with my winnings!"

"Too much bookkeeping," Wayne answered with an irritating shrug. "Let's make it an even five hundred for the all-around championship of Shoshone."

Cherry Caruthers narrowed her eyes as she studied Wayne Cary's face. To Wyoming rodeo fans, the handsome movie cowboy would be an unknown quantity. Now Wayne Cary was proposing a wager with the defending champion, the winner of which would have to beat the field of contestants in three events out of four.

Cherry was not sure that she liked this trait in Wayne until she glanced at his face. He was watching Ralph Butler who was staring down at the toes of his polished hand-made boots. And Cherry was sure that she could detect an expression of sincere admiration in Wayne Cary's face.

RALPH was openly resentful, and he did not lack in self-confidence. Cherry watched the big cowboy as he struggled to make a decision. Before he could answer, Wayne added an incentive to his bet.

"You might not want to go, but I'll guarantee you a screen test if you are good enough to beat me three out of four in the arena," he dangled as bait. "If you haven't entered the four events, there is still time to pay your fees."

Ralph Butler scowled and took a step forward. A flush stained his rugged face.

"I always win when I make up my mind to it," he said quietly, and for once there was no bravado in his deep voice. "I never wanted any truck with Hollywood, but if I win, I'm going to get your job."

"Then it's a bet?"

"Cherry can hold the money," Ralph said, with a nod of his head. "Imagine me in hoss operas!"

"I've got a good imagination, but it has its limits," Wayne murmured with his face turned away, and then he handed some paper money to Cherry. "I'll see you at the bucking chutes," he added and, touching his horse with a blunted spur, he rode away with a wave of his free hand.

CHAPTER II

"Bronc Riders, Get Ready!"

QUEEN CHERRY rode proudly at the head of the grand entry with Ralph Butler, the defending champion of the Shoshone Rodeo. Cherry smiled and waved at the fans who called her name, but Ralph rode by her side in gloomy silence.

Cherry glanced at the big fellow beside her as they passed the judges' stand. The champion was noted for his booming laugh and his rough good humor, but now she saw him staring at a tall cowboy standing in the judges' stand. And when she raised her eyes to the cowboy's face, Wayne Cary tipped his hat with a smile.

The announcer began a build-up which made Ralph scowl even more. The loudspeaker was telling the spectators all about Wayne Cary, star of Western pictures, adding that the actor would take part in four major events.

"He's just a publicity hound," Ralph Butler growled, and Cherry smiled.

"It is part of his business," she explained. "If you win that bet you made with Wayne, you will be doing the same thing."

"Not me," Ralph denied. "Now you take those Hollywood cowboys. Say they drive a herd of cattle through the Rio Grande River. They always come out on the other side with their white pants pressed, and their boots all shined. Bah!"

Cherry smiled, her eyes twinkling. She remembered the cattle drives across Shoshone Creek when her father's crew were moving the stock to summer pastures. The cowboys always hung their boots around their necks, and emerged on the far side looking as if they had been caught in a rainstorm.

The parade had been moving, and as the announcer finished his introductions, Cherry and Ralph rode through the gate and headed for the big barn. The saddle bronc event would open the show, and the announcer's voice called a warning to the contestants.

"Saddle-bronc riders get ready!"

"I'm riding last," Ralph growled, and headed for his dressing-room.

Cherry watched the muscles in his broad back as he swaggered across the lot, muscles

that had twisted a steer down in the dogging event mighty close to record time. She wondered just how good Wayne Cary was in the grueling cowboy sports.

Again she felt a little jump of her heart when the announcer told the crowds that Wayne Cary would ride second. Cherry hurried into the arena and ran up the stairs into the press box where a seat had been reserved for the queen. As she took her seat, a pair of strong hands gripped her rounded shoulders as a smooth tanned face bowed over her close to her cheek.

"Wish me luck in this event, Queen Cherry."

Cherry nodded when she recognized the rich, vibrant tones of Wayne Cary's voice. His touch sent the warm blood rioting through her veins, and she did not shrug from under his strong hands.

"Good luck, cowboy," she whispered, and wondered if the fans around her could see the flush on her face. "You'll need it," she added earnestly. "Ralph can really ride the big rough broncs!"

A little grip on her shoulders and Wayne was gone to climb the chute gate. Cherry turned with a smile, but it fled when she saw Ralph Butler in his old rigging, scowling at Wayne.

"I'm going to beat his ears off," Ralph promised in a low voice. "By dogies, I mean to spoil his good looks, the dang pilgrim!"

A saddle bronc roared out of the chute beneath them to stop any reply Cherry might have made. The rider was bucked off on his third jump, and Cherry watched as Wayne Cary lowered himself to the committee saddle aboard a horse in Chute Number Two.

"He's drawn Ducking Dolly," she murmured, and clenched her hands. "I do wish he had drawn a better horse!"

"He'll be lucky if he sticks on that mare," Butler growled, but he leaned over the rail to watch.

THE chute gate swung open, and Ducking Dolly lunged into the arena with Cary scratching his first four in the shoulders, according to Association rules. The bucking mare swallowed her head and lashed high with both heels, but Wayne scratched for points and rode with a supple back. With his left hand holding the hackrope, and his right high above his head.

Cherry groaned when the mare stopped bucking and started to run.

"A race-horse!" she whispered, and frowned when Ralph threw back his head and boomed out his famous laugh.

Cherry knew that everyone in the stands would look her way. When they did, Butler waved his hat and took a bow.

"You don't like publicity, do you?" she asked the champion pointedly, and Ralph stopped smiling. He whirled on his heel and stamped down the steps just as Wayne Cary climbed the rail and took the seat at Cherry's side.

"I'll lose this one," he told her quietly. "Ducking Dolly quit on me."

The horses were turned out beneath them, and several good rides were scored. Wayne raised his head when the announcer told the fans that the champion would be the next rider.

"Ralph Butler coming out of Chute Number Four on Merry-Go-Round!"

"I hope he gets dizzy," Cary muttered.

"You feel yourself slipping?" Cherry asked, and the imps of mischief danced in her blue eyes.

"I felt myself slipping the first time I saw you," Wayne answered softly. "And believe me, Queen, I fell hard!"

Cherry's heart skipped a beat at the caressing tone in the actor's vibrant voice. She asked herself if he were acting, but she could not trust herself to glance at his face. Perhaps he told the same thing to all the girls, but his evident sincerity silenced her.

The chute gate slammed back before she could answer. Ralph Butler was scratching the shoulders of a big gray bucker who came out bawling. The horse fence-cornered and swiveled bony hips with the champ writing on his range-scarred hide. Then Merry-Go-Round went into his turn to live up to his name.

The gray began to chase its tail in a dizzy circle which gradually narrowed until the bucker seemed like a big spinning top. Cherry leaned over the rail, shouting encouragement as she stamped both high-heeled boots.

"Kick him with the right spur, champ! Bring him out of the whirligig!"

"Get him hoss!" Wayne yelled. "Yippee!"

Ralph Butler was kicking with his right spur and nudging viciously with his left. His face was a white blur in a whirling circle of dirty gray, and as the seconds ticked away, it was evident that he was riding by sheer balance.

"Straighten out and let him have it!" Wayne shouted at the bucker.

Cherry closed her eyes and moaned softly. If Merry-Go-Round straightened out suddenly, Ralph would fly from the saddle with incredible speed. He would be so dizzy that he would not be able to roll, and he might suffer serious injury.

The gun exploded to signal the end of the ten-second ride, but the gray bucker was still spinning. The pick-up men were waiting, but they couldn't get in close to take the rider from the committee saddle.

"Roll, cowboy, roll!" Cherry heard Wayne Cary whisper hoarsely.

The gray bucker stumbled and pitched to the dust, and a yell went up from the crowd. Ralph kicked his boots free and stepped off just as the horse went down on the left side. The champ took several running steps and began to whirl. He tried to stamp his right boot to stop the turn, and then he went down and rolled over in a cloud of dust.

"What a ride!" Cherry heard the actor shout. "That boy's got a mighty good head, and he knows how to use it!"

"Why, Wayne," Cherry chided. "I didn't know you cared that much for Ralph!"

"Didn't want that big son to get hurt," he growled. "I'm going to beat him in the calf-roping!"

He leaped over the rail, landed lightly in the dust, and hurried to Ralph who was still swaying uncertainly. He steadied the rider and spoke earnestly.

"Nice going, champ. You get hurt any?"

RALPH'S head seemed to clear like magic. He shrugged away the actor's hand and pushed the man away.

"Don't make me laugh," he answered, then threw back his head and sent his booming laugh across the arena. "That's just part of my act," he told Wayne. "I just stagger around to make the ride look good. You want to make something of it?"

Wayne stared at the champion and slowly shook his head. He turned abruptly and walked through the gate to inspect his riding gear and ropes. The calf-roping event would follow the steer decorating, and any contestant who started a fight would lose his entry fees.

Ralph Butler stared at Wayne Cary's back with a bewildered frown. Perhaps Wayne was afraid of him, or like as not his contract prohibited fighting which might mar the actor's manly beauty. Ralph had seen Wayne in the grandstand with Cherry, and as his anger increased, the dizziness came back to him.

He put out a hand to steady himself and fell to the dust. He got up, fell again, and sat down with his eyes closed. He opened them when a small hand touched his big shoulder.

"Are you all right, Ralph?" Cherry asked solicitously.

"Right as rain," he answered, and a wide grin spread over his grimy face. "Wish me luck in the calf-roping, will you, queenie?"

"Good luck," Cherry answered heartily, and gripped the champ's hand.

CHAPTER III

"Get Along, Little Dogies"

CHERRY CARUTHERS returned to her regal throne, but she scarcely saw the contestants in the steer decorating event. Her heart was asking questions to which she could give no coherent answers.

She liked Ralph Butler and his rough comradeship. He was the acknowledged king of the Shoshone cowboys, and he made a good working hand on his little ranch during the off season. He was popular with the local girls, but he made no pretense about his preference for Cherry.

His strong arms thrilled her when they were dancing, and he had kissed her after the last dance they had attended. Cherry told herself that it was nothing serious—just the natural attraction of two healthy young people for each other. And it wasn't the first time she had been kissed.

Wayne Cary was somehow different, and for all his deference and quiet good manners, he had come close to telling Cherry of his love for her. Cherry shrugged and told herself that Wayne was just acting. Then she remembered the light in his gray eyes, and the vibrant sincerity of his deep voice.

She brought herself back to realities with a start when the announcer called for the calf-ropers to get ready. She could see both Ralph and Wayne out near the calf chutes at the far end of the arena, but they were staying away from each other. She pressed a hand against the roll of bills in the pocket

of her white silk blouse—a thousand dollars for the winner of the Shoshone championship.

A roper was speeding after a fleet-footed calf with his catch-rope whirling. The catch was good, the calf tied up, and the time given as twenty-two seconds. Cherry shrugged coldly. If Ralph Butler was in form, the winning time should be somewhere around fifteen seconds.

The next roper threw his loop away and refused to try with a second loop to which he was entitled.

The announcer said then that Ralph Butler would be the next roper, with Wayne Cary in the hole. Cherry sat up as her heart began to beat faster.

Ralph was behind the barrier with his catch-rope ready, and the piggin' string between his strong white teeth. The gateman dropped his flag, and the timers clicked their watches.

Ralph gigged with his spurs and was after the Brahma calf fast. His trained horse spurned the ground with flying hoofs, put his rider into position, and Ralph made his throw. The noose whizzed like a bullet and settled true. Ralph threw his coils away, stepped down running and went hand-over-hand down the rope.

He flanked the calf and "busted" it to make it lay, whipped the loop of his piggin' string over a front leg, gathering up the two hind legs against his thighs. Two wraps and a hitch to make a three-bone tie, and Ralph's hands shot high above his head. Down came the red flag of the field judge, and Cherry held her breath as she waited for the announcer to give the time.

"Fourteen and four-fifths seconds!"

Cherry heard herself cheering. Ralph had broken fifteen seconds, which was fast enough to take first money. And then the announcer said the next roper would be:

"Wayne Cary!"

Cherry leaned over to study the handsome cowboy actor. Wayne was sitting his roping horse behind the barrier, with his lass-rope swinging. His piggin' string was looped in his belt. Then the flagman dropped the barrier and his flag to signal the start of the time.

Wayne nudged Little Joe, his roping horse, with a blunted spur. He was swinging a head-sized loop and coming up fast. The noose left his hand to circle the fleeing calf's head. Wayne threw his coils away as he was dropping from the left side. Then he braced himself as the calf swung wide on the end of the taut rope.

He saved a second when he caught the calf and kept it on its feet. If the calf went down, the rules stipulated that it must get to its feet, and be wrestled down by hand.

Wayne caught a front leg and fore-footed the calf with surprising speed. He jerked the piggin' string from his belt, slipped the noose over a front foot, tied the two hind legs, and his hands shot over his head to signal that he had wrapped up his veal for inspection.

THE field judge dropped his flag with swishing speed, and the timers stopped their watches. Wayne Cary was walking slowly back to Little Joe, and Cherry leaned forward with her breath straining against her lungs.

"I never saw such speed," she heard herself whisper. "He's no drug-store cowhand!"

The announcer lowered his voice and told it in a hushed whisper!

"Wayne Cary tied up his meat in—fourteen seconds flat!"

Cherry gasped, and for a moment she did not know whether to cheer or to cry. Fourteen seconds was a new record for Shoshone, and she had wished Ralph Butler good luck!

She heard herself screaming as the crowd shouted appreciation. Then she suddenly stopped and bit her tongue. What had she done?

She had wished Ralph Butler good luck, and he had lost. She had also wished Wayne Cary good luck in the saddle bronc event, and he had lost!

Cherry lowered her curly blond head and closed her eyes. If Ralph Butler won the championship, and the wager he had made with Wayne Cary, Ralph would go to Hollywood for a screen test. He would be Wayne's rival in the film capital, and yet it was Wayne who had offered Ralph a screen test as part of the wager.

Either Wayne Cary wanted Ralph Butler to make a screen test, or else he was superbly confident of his ability to beat the Shoshone champion in the rodeo events. Cherry considered the problem thoughtfully, remembering that Wayne had broken the Shoshone record in the calf-roping.

A big hand touched her gently on the shoulder, and she opened her eyes and

looked up into the smiling face of Wayne Cary. She told herself that he looked like a cowboy in his working clothes, and that Ralph Butler looked more like an actor in his rodeo outfit.

"The dogging event will be run off soon," Cary spoke calmly. "Are you going to wish me luck?"

Cherry studied a moment, then shook her head.

"I'm going to keep still and leave everything to the gods of chance," she answered soberly. "My wishes seem to go backward, so I'll just sit this one out!"

"By dogies, that's right," he agreed with a smile. "You wished me luck in the bronc riding, and you did the same for Butler in the roping."

Cherry changed the subject to follow a thought of her own.

"Do you think you will win the dogging?" she asked bluntly.

"Why, of course," Cary answered. "Don't tell any one, but I've really been getting in some practise."

"Where do you practise?" Cherry asked.

"I've a little spread not too far from Hollywood," he admitted, with a rueful smile.

"Do you raise cattle?"

"A few pure-bloods," Cary answered. "But mostly I'm interested in palominos with pink skins. Remember?"

Cherry remembered their conversation when they had first met, and she felt a quickening of her pulse. Horses always brought people closer together, and Cary told her of some fine palomino mares he had recently bought.

"I'd like to buy your Selim stallion," he confided. "Will you name a price?"

"Me sell Selim?" Cherry asked, and her face expressed her incredulity at the question. "Not for any money in the world!"

"I was afraid of that," Cary said, with complete understanding.

"You and Ralph have each won an event." Cherry changed the subject again. "I think Ralph will win."

Carey stared at her, then smiled. "Mind telling me why?" he asked.

"He's heavier than you, and that counts in the steer wrestling," Cherry explained. "And the Brahma bulls here are mighty big and tough."

"The bigger they are—"

"The harder they hit," Cherry finished.

"I'll win." Wayne Cary spoke confidently. "I've got a coin with heads on both sides. I can't lose."

"You can't?"

"Nu-uh," he murmured, and once more his face had the enigmatic smile which she could not interpret. "It's in the bag, so don't worry," Wayne went on. "Unless you want to wish Butler—good luck!"

"I don't believe I like that," Cherry complained, and Wayne reached over and patted her hand.

"I'll tell you later," he promised, and then the announcer warned the steer wrestlers to get ready.

CARY started for the stairs, side-stepped quickly to avoid colliding with Ralph Butler, and hurried away with a wave of his hand. Ralph glared at his back and came to Cherry.

"Is that wolf bothering you again?" he asked sharply.

"Wayne doesn't bother me," Cherry answered, and pouted her red lips. "Please don't ask me to wish you luck," she pleaded.

"Huh?" Ralph said slowly. "That's what I came up here for. Have you already wished that dude luck?"

"Wayne isn't a dude, and I didn't wish him luck," Cherry retorted, with a toss of her head. "They've called the doggers to get ready, and you better hurry."

"I'm crazy about you, gal," Ralph said hoarsely. "I never said much about it, but I don't like the way Cary shines up to you."

"Please, Ralph!" Cherry whispered. "You must hurry!"

"That's what I know," Ralph said. "If I don't hurry, that Hollywood cowboy will ask you to marry him first. I'm sound in wind and limb, and I've got a nice little start."

The announcer's voice interrupted to say that Wayne Cary would be the first steer wrestler, with Ralph Butler in the hole. Cherry sighed with relief. There were some things she wanted to think about, and after watching her for a moment, Ralph ran down the stairs and mounted his horse for the ride to the field chutes.

The trick riders finished their turn and rode from the field. Ralph was racing down the arena, and Wayne was riding alongside the chute to get into position. His hazer was to the left of the chute, and Ralph raced up and shouted a question at him.

"Can you beat eight seconds, Mister Cary?"

Cary twisted in the saddle and frowned. A cowboy never called another hand "Mister" unless he didn't like him. Wayne Cary's lip curled.

"I have beaten eight seconds, Mister Butler," he retorted. "And I don't mean lap-and-tap. Can you?"

"Fly at yore chores," Butler answered loudly. "The Shoshone record is seven and four-fifths, and I made it. I aim to shade it some today!"

"Timers and judges ready!" the announcer warned. "Turn him out for the boys. Get along, little dogies!"

CHAPTER IV

The Best Man

WAYNE CARY sat his Little Joe horse at the side of the chute waiting for the flagman to spring the barrier. There was a ten-second penalty for jumping the flag, and the field judges had keen eyes. The animal in the chute was a big red steer with straight horns, Mexican graded stock to run about eight hundred pounds.

Down came the red flag as the gateman pulled the string which released the rope barrier. The red steer lunged across the white line, with Cary and his hazer lifting their impatient horses into a dead run from a standing start. They closed in fast, one on each side, and Cary made his leap from the saddle.

His powerful arms went over and under the steer's neck, and he caught a grip on the horns with both hands. His boot-heels gouged furrows in the ground as he braked to a stop. He twisted and threw all his weight and shoulder muscles into one mighty effort.

The steer went down, and a groan went up from the crowd. It was a "dog-fall", with the steer's legs in one direction, the dogger's in another. The rules called for the wrestler's legs to face the same direction as the steer's.

Wayne Cary shifted and threw his lithe body over and across the prostrate steer. The flag slammed down to stop the watches of the timers in the stands.

Cherry leaned forward to listen as the announcer took a deep breath. Then he gave the time:

"Eight seconds flat!"

Cherry's eyes were round with wonder as she remembered what she had seen. Even with the dog-fall, Wayne Cary had rassled down his ox in eight seconds.

Ralph Butler would have to get all the breaks to better that mark, and several things could happen. If Ralph broke the barrier, he would add ten seconds to his elapsed time. If he drew a rubberneck steer, who twisted its neck and refused to go down, much more time would be lost. He might even get a dog-fall, or miss the steer completely on the jump from the saddle.

Cherry smiled reprovingly at herself because of her pessimism. Ralph was a champion, and it was just good common sense to string along with the champ. She could see him and his hazer waiting at the chutes at the end of the field, and then the bunting swished down to start the timers' watches.

She saw the big roan steer dash across the white line, saw Ralph lift his horse in hot pursuit. The hazer closed in to pocket the steer between the two horses, and Ralph made his jump.

Cherry knew the strength of those big brown hands which caught a grip around the wide spread of horns. Down thundered Ralph's boots, the twist, and both steer and dogger went down in a cloud of dust. Before Cherry could see Ralph's legs, the red flag came down to signal a clean fall.

Butler got up and dusted his clothing. He picked up his old black Stetson and started for the stands with his head lowered to catch the announcer's clear voice. Cherry knew it was going to be startling when the announcer began to whisper.

"The champ dogged his steer in—seven seconds flat!"

Cherry joined in the wild yell which went up from the stands. Again she felt strong firm hands on her rounded shoulders, and the thrill which ran through her told her that the hands were Wayne Cary's. She tilted her head back and saw him smiling with evident enjoyment. Not with the disappointed expression of a loser.

"Ralph won this go-around," she told the smiling actor. "Fastest time I ever saw, aside from lap-and-tap."

"There's still the bull riding," Wayne an-

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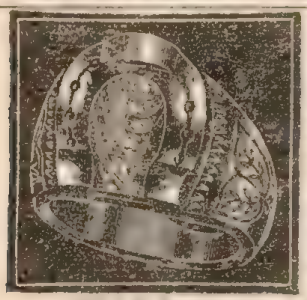

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swered with a shrug. "I can win that one, and make it all-even."

"I wish you wouldn't ride the bulls," Cherry said earnestly. "You might get hooked, even if you finish a ride!"

"Butler might get hooked," Cary countered, and he wasn't smiling. "That's the chance we both take, and the clowns will fight the Brahmas to keep them off the riders."

Wayne stepped back as Ralph came up the stairs with a frown darkening his tanned face. Wayne stepped forward and offered his hand and his congratulations. Ralph refused the hand and thrust out his jaw.

"You better stay away from Cherry," he warned thickly. "Cherry and me—"

"Not so fast, champ," Cherry interrupted, and now her blue eyes showed their resentment as she repeated a remark Ralp' himself had made. "I'm not a prize horse or cow to be read off in public!"

"Sorry, queenie," Ralph made his apologies. "Just remember what I told you."

"That goes double," Wayne Cary interrupted. His face was stern, but then he began to smile. "I wish you luck, champ. Most of it—bad!"

TURNING abruptly on his heel, Wayne stamped from the Queen's box and headed for the bucking chutes. The trick ropers were working in arena center, and the bull riding would be the next major event. Cherry watched Wayne until he was out of sight, and then turned to Ralph.

"He likes you, Ralph," she said thoughtfully. "I don't know why, when you treat him the way you do, but he does."

"That's just show business," Ralph grunted. "He knows he can't win the Shoshone championship, and if I get into pictures, I mean to give him tough competition!"

"You both will always give your best," Cherry declared, and she was still trying to figure out Wayne's strange behavior.

As Ralph took a step forward and reached for her left hand, she reminded him that the announcer was calling the bull riders to get ready.

"Wish me luck," Butler begged.

"No," Cherry refused. "I might bring you bad luck, and may the best man win!"

Ralph grimaced but had to be content. He grinned and went down the stairs, stopping on a little landing to look into the chutes.

[*Turn to page 98*]

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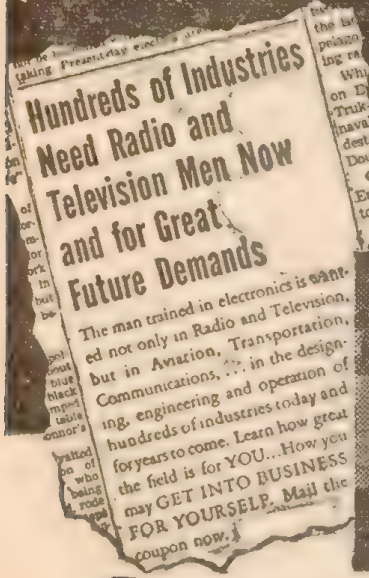

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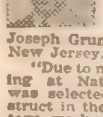

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Six big Brahma bulls were penned in the chutes; animals which would weigh three-quarters of a ton apiece. There was plenty of time. And Cary would ride third, with Butler himself closing the show on a bull named Diablo.

"He's a devil all right," Ralph muttered, "but I can ride him from here to who pried the chunk!"

The first rider spilled out of the chute and lasted two jumps. The second bull rider lasted two seconds longer, and Association rules called for an eight-second ride on the shaggy, fighting bulls.

Ralph glanced up at Cherry and saw her watching Wayne Cary intently. A spasm of jealousy clouded the champion's face when he read the concern in the girl's wide blue eyes.

Wayne was lowering himself to the broad tawny back of his Spillum bull, and setting his blunted spurs high in the shoulders.

He had sprinkled powdered resin on his gloved left hand, and he caught a firm grip on the bull-rigging. He would ride with one hand free, and would be disqualified if that free hand touched the bull during the ride.

He was sitting deep behind the big hump on the Brahma's back, and he gave the gatemen the go-ahead.

"Let him come apart!"

The gates swung back with Spillum lunging into the arena with slobbers of saliva streaming from flaring nostrils. The big bull swallowed its head and lashed high with both heels, swiveling bony hips while in mid-air.

Wayne Cary was writing on the bull with flashing spurs to catch the eyes of the judges, and the clowns moved in close with their waving red capes. The bull went into a spin for three seconds, broke sharply to the right, then back to the left in a series of fence-corners.

Cherry caught her breath when she saw Wayne's body lurch behind the Brahma's hump. He was leaning far to the right when the bull lunged to the left. Then Wayne joined the bird-gang in ignominious flight and sailed through the dusty air far ahead of the enraged bull.

He landed on hands and knees and flattened out to make himself thin on the ground. The bull rushed over him with head high, hooking to the right. A man attempting to get up would have been killed, but

Wayne Cary knew the ways of Brahma bulls which hooked with both eyes wide open.

As the Spillum bull turned for another charge, the two clowns were on top of it with their red capes in its face. Cary rolled and sprinted for the fence, and Cherry sighed with relief when he climbed the bars and vaulted lightly to the floor of her box.

"You rode seven seconds," she whispered, and both her hands unconsciously gripped the cowboy's wide shoulders. "I thought the bull had you, Wayne, and I nearly passed away!"

Wayne Cary caught his breath and Cherry's hands at the same time. He pulled the girl toward him and kissed her full on the lips. Then he dropped her hands and lowered his head with a stricken look in his gray eyes.

"I've spoiled my chances," he murmured. "What can I say to excuse myself?"

He glanced up when she made no reply. Her left hand was pressed against her lips, and her eyes were studying his flushed face as though she were trying to find an answer.

WAYNE CARY twisted and sprang to his feet. He rushed down the stairs and climbed a fence on the other side of the bucking chutes where Cherry could not see him. And he wondered how many people had seen him take advantage of a trusting girl who was concerned only for his safety, after his narrow escape from the huge Brahma bull.

The announcer's voice restored his poise somewhat when he announced that the next rider would be Ralph Butler, the reigning champ. Win or lose the bull ride, Butler would still be the champion.

Cary gripped the top rail and leaned forward to watch the gate on Chute Number Three. The Diablo bull was a big black Brahma with short, blunted horns. Eighteen hundred pounds of muscle and fury, and a killer whether a cowboy made a complete ride, or was bucked off before the gun.

The gate swung back and the black bull rushed into the arena, bawling with rage, It buck-jumped, swiveled its hips, swallowed its head, and went into a whirligig with no lost motion.

Up on the hurricane deck behind the big hump, Ralph Butler was writing his message of mastery with his blunted spurs. Hitting first on one side and then the other to main-

[*Turn page*]

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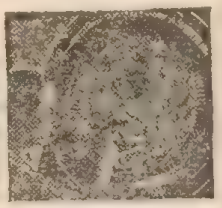

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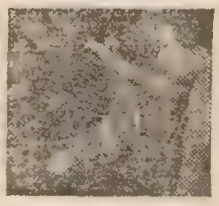

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tain his precarious balance, and throwing all his magnificent strength into his rigid left arm which was gripping the bull-rigging.

Diablo leaped high into the air with all four feet off the ground, and sunned his belly. He thundered down on stiffened legs, buckled the right knee, and kicked high behind.

Ralph lurched forward and to the left as he guessed the buckled knee correctly, and his booming laugh pealed across the dusty arena.

Cherry watched with her hands tightly clenched. The color had drained from her face, and she moaned softly when the bull went into a spin. Two turns, and the Brahma snapped out of the spin to buckle the left knee, but the big cowboy spur-whipped the maddened monster like a champion.

Brang!

The gun exploded to signal the end of the ride, but the bull was still pitching. The clowns closed in, waving their capes, and it was up to Butler to get off as best he could. It was his bull from the time the chute gate opened, and there were no pick-up men because of the danger to the trained horses.

Diablo started to run, and Ralph threw his right leg up and over the bull's lowered head. He landed on his feet on the left side, braked with his boot-heels, and raced for the fence. The bull turned on a dime and charged after the racing cowboy.

One of the clowns threw his red cape in front of the bull which caught the crimson and tore it to shreds. That three seconds was all Butler needed, and as he leaped to the fence Wayne Cary caught him and pulled him over just as the bull hit the rails head-on.

Both men fell on the other side and rolled to take the sting from their fall. Butler growled his thanks until he saw his helper. Then he came to his feet with both hands clenched.

"I saw you kiss Cherry, you Vine Street wolf!" he accused. "I'm bringing it to you!"

He rushed with both hands flailing, and his head down. Cary side-stepped and jabbed twice with his left fist. Then he stepped in behind a terrific uppercut which caught Butler flush on the jaw and dropped him flat on his face.

Cary dusted his hands and turned just in time to see Cherry coming toward him. She dropped to her knees beside Butler, and

Cary hurried away to the dressing-room. He had crowded his luck, and he had lost a chance for the championship. Cherry could give Butler his winnings.

Wayne Cary walked across the dusty yard with a stricken expression of loss on his handsome face. Ralph Butler was the best man.

CHAPTER V

The Winner

RALPH BUTLER was dressed in his rodeo best for the Cowboys' Ball in the big hotel. His wine-colored, gabardine shirt and gray frontier pants were tailored to fit his powerful body, and his hand-made boots were polished like mirrors. He wore the coveted belt symbolic of the Shoshone championship, and only a slight lump on his jaw told of his brief fight with Wayne Cary.

Ralph took off his black Stetson and hurried to meet Cherry who had just entered the big lobby. She was dressed in white serge, and the tailored cowboy pants detracted nothing from her slim beauty. She wore a white silk blouse, a white Stetson, and white kid boots. And she was accompanied by a handsome old cattleman with white hair and closely-trimmed mustache.

Cherry saw Ralph, and she gasped a bit when she also saw Wayne coming toward her from the other end of the room. He was dressed in a stunning outfit which matched her own. White serge frontier pants, short bolero jacket of the same material, and a heavy white silk shirt. Cherry saw Ralph clench his fists as he spotted Wayne.

"You've got to help me, Dad," Cherry whispered to her father, and Charley Caruthers nodded with a twinkling smile.

Wayne came up and swept off his white Stetson. He ignored the scowling Ralph as he bowed to Cherry.

"Wayne," she said, "I want you to meet my father. Dad, this is Wayne Cary of Hollywood."

"Glad to know you, my boy," the old cattleman said heartily. "Are you going to settle in these parts?"

"That's right," Wayne answered, and

[*Turn page*]

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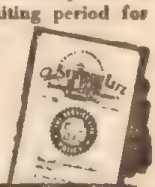

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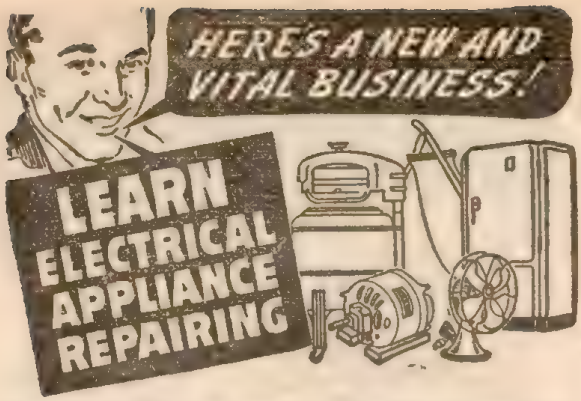

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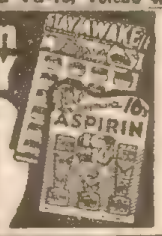

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Cherry wheeled around with a start of surprise.

"You are?" she whispered.

"That's right," Cary answered steadily. "May I have the *second* dance?"

Ralph started to scowl and changed it to a triumphant smile. Wayne was giving the champion his due without an argument, and the champion opened the ball with the queen.

"I'll be glad to help you pick out a suitable spread, Cary," Charley Caruthers offered affably. "Might even consider selling you an interest in the C Bar C."

"I might take you up on that offer," Cary answered quietly, and then the orchestra started playing in the big ball-room.

Ralph Butler led the queen proudly across the floor and lined up for the grand march. Cary stood on the side-lines talking with Charley Caruthers. Cherry gripped Ralph's arm and looked straight ahead, and he offered a penny for her thoughts.

"You like that picture cowboy, don't you?" Ralph asked directly. "You didn't slap him when he kissed you this afternoon."

Cherry gasped.

"You saw that?" she whispered, and then her long lashes veiled her blue eyes. "Yes, I like Wayne," she admitted honestly. "I am so glad he is going to stay here."

"And I'll be leaving," Ralph said gloomily. "I tricked him into making that bet, and I had one of the boys plant that idea in his mind about me getting a screen test, but Cary doesn't know it."

"You mean you are going to Hollywood?" Cherry asked, and her heart began to beat faster.

"Will you go with me?" Ralph asked, and leaned forward as he watched her face.

"I like it better here in Wyoming," Cherry answered in a low voice. "I had a chance in pictures, and I turned it down to stay with Dad on the C Bar C."

The music started to open up the grand march, and Ralph led the way down the long floor. After the march was over, the queen presented Ralph with another gem-studded belt buckle, emblematic of the current Shoshone championship.

Butler took the belt and received congratulations from his friends. Cherry slipped away in the confusion, and Wayne Cary came to claim her for the second dance, which was really the first dance. As he explained to Cherry, the grand march was pomp and circumstance.

AT LAST the orchestra started playing a dreamy waltz, and Cherry melted into the arms of her tall, handsome escort. Wayne Cary was a splendid dancer, and Cherry closed her eyes and lost herself in the ecstasy of smooth rhythm. She thrilled to the pressure of his strong arm around her, and when she opened her eyes, he had guided her to a shaded corner.

"I love you," he said suddenly, and without warning. "I've loved you since the first time I saw you when you were in Hollywood making that screen test two years ago."

"Oh!" Cherry gasped. "You saw me then?"

"I saw you, and wanted you for my leading lady," he murmured, with his lips close to her ear. "I still want you for my leading lady."

"But I won't be in pictures," Cherry demurred.

"Neither will I," Wayne confessed quietly, and he smiled when she tilted back her head to study his face.

"You won't?"

"Nuh-uh," Wayne murmured. "I've a little confession to make to you, Queen Cherry," he continued, and guided her smoothly through the steps of the dance. "I did not want to renew my contract, but I promised to get a better man to take my place. I've got him."

"You mean—Ralph?" Cherry asked slowly. "You mean you had this all planned?"

"That's right," Wayne admitted. "I had one of the cowboys make a suggestion to Ralph Butler. Then Ralph made the same suggestion to me, and I made it one of the conditions of my wager with him. He does not know it, but my studio has been shooting pictures of him for more than six months. He's a natural for a Hollywood cowboy!"

"Now I know what you meant when you said you had a coin with heads on both sides," Cherry chided the tall actor. "Tell me, Wayne," she insisted, "did you deliberately throw your chances to win the championship this afternoon?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die on this spot," he answered, then he moved over swiftly to another spot. "Ralph Butler was just the best man, and he'd be a natural at that, too."

"A natural?" Cherry murmured.

"I love you, Queen Cherry," Wayne murmured earnestly. "Won't you marry me?"

[*Turn page*]

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Cherry glanced about, observed that they were still in the shadows, and tilted back her head.

"Yes, Wayne," she answered, and offered her full red lips. "I love you, too, and next year you will be the champ!"

Wayne Cary lowered his head and stopped his moving feet. Cherry sighed as the now familiar thrill started her blood to racing, and her heart to pounding.

"I've come home," he whispered to his promised bride. "And I've really found a home."

"You have?"

"I have," he answered reverently. "I've bought a half interest in the C Bar C from old Charley, and you don't know how much I like him. We won't make any changes."

"We won't?"

"Nuh-uh," Wayne murmured, and he could feel Cherry's heart pounding against his swelling chest. "Old Charley won't lose a daughter, but he will gain a son. He won't live with us, but we will live with him, if he wants it that way!"

"Wayne, you darling!" Cherry murmured, and, standing on her tiptoes, she kissed him warmly.

Wayne Cary stopped dancing and forgot time and place. He raised his head when a big hand tapped him on the arm. Ralph Butler was glaring at him with fight in his narrowed gray eyes, but Cherry stepped between the two men.

"Please, Ralph," she pleaded gently. "Wayne was telling me that you were the best man at the rodeo this afternoon. Won't you please try to see it that way?"

"Best man," Ralph sneered hotly. "I won the championship and our bet, and looks like that Hollywood cowboy won you!"

"You won the championship fair and square, Butler," Cary said quietly. "I'd like to think I won Cherry the same way."

"You've won her?" Butler asked, and his voice was thick.

"We are going to be married," Cherry said in a whisper. "We want you to be the—best man. Will you, Ralph?"

"How about that screen test, Cary?" Butler demanded. "And right here and now I want to state that I mean to get your job. Are you going to keep your word?"

"That's right," Cary answered, and he didn't smile. "I'm positive that you will get a contract."

"That's mighty decent of you," Ralph mur-

mured, and then a wry smile twisted his lips. "I wasn't exactly honest, Wayne," he stated manfully. "I planted a fellow to make the suggestion to you about that screen test. It was the only way I knew to get a chance in pictures."

WAYNE CARY smiled and offered his hand.

"No hard feelings," he said sincerely. "It looks like we just traded places. You will be a natural as a Western star, and I've wanted to get away from Hollywood and back to cowboying for a long time."

Charley Caruthers joined the group and glanced at the three earnest faces. Then he whistled softly and turned Cherry to face him.

"Did he ask you?" Caruthers asked in a loud whisper.

Cherry blushed and whispered to her father to keep still. Wayne stared at the old cattleman, and Ralph threw back his head and gave out with his booming laugh.

"You chased Cherry until she caught you," he taunted Cary. "And I'll bet my first month's pay you bought a half interest in the C Bar C from old Charley. How about it?"

"Bridle your jaw with your big mouth wide open," the old cattleman growled. "You're no mind reader!"

"I've learned to read sign," Ralph retorted. "Looks to me like Wayne Cary has been put upon by all of us."

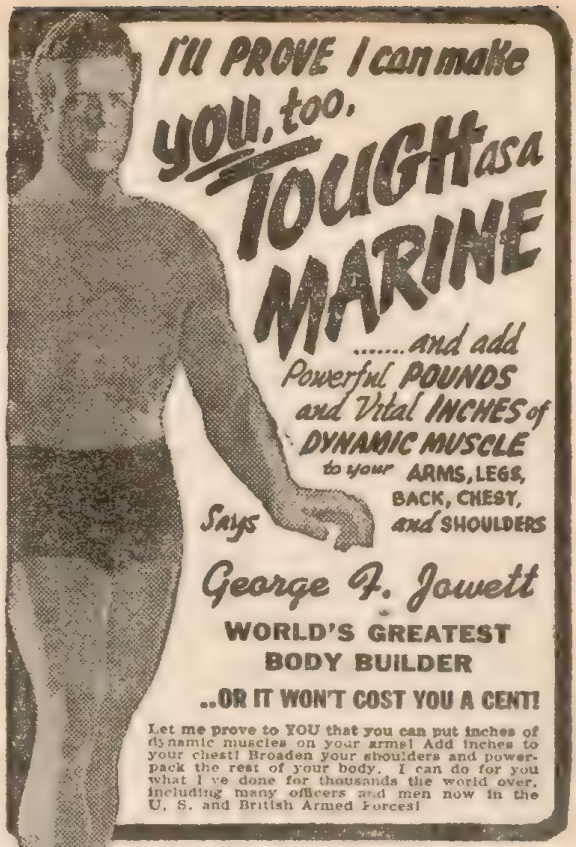
"I don't get it," Wayne drawled. "I've wanted Cherry for two years, and I wanted to come back home to the open range. I had to get another good man to take my place, and I wanted to buy in on a good cattle ranch. Seems to me I've got everything my little heart desired."

"I'll come clean," Charley Caruthers confessed ruefully. "I did want you for a partner in the C Bar C. I've watched your work in pictures, and you seemed like one of our own Wyoming cowhands."

"Dad wanted a son, too, without losing a daughter," Cherry admitted in a throaty whisper. "And I've been in love with you for more than a year, Wayne Cary! Am I shameless?"

"You're my queen," Cary answered warmly, then he turned to Ralph. "Will you be my best man?" he pleaded. "Because, after all, you are, champ!"

[*Turn page*]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"Count me in," Butler agreed heartily. "And I'm asking you if you will smart me up on some of the things I ought to know about pictures. Will you, pard?"

"Count it done," Cary agreed. "And like I said in the beginning, you will be a natural. Where were you born, Ralph?"

The big champion frowned, then he began to smile broadly. He threw back his head and laughed his famous booming laugh.

"I was born and raised in Hollywood," he admitted honestly. "How about you, Wayne? Where was you dragged up?"

Now it was Wayne Cary's turn to flush as he glanced at Cherry who snuggled up to him and into his strong arms.

"I was born and raised on a cattle ranch here in Wyoming," he confessed. "Over near Cheyenne. And I've wanted to get back ever since I first saw Cherry when she came to Hollywood for her screen test!"

"Well I'm a double father," Charley Caruthers said feelingly. "I certainly am, and I don't know yet who outsmarted whom. I wanted Wayne for a partner, Cherry wanted him for a husband, and he wanted Cherry and a part of the C Bar C. You, Ralph, wanted a chance in pictures, and Wayne promised to get some one to take his place. This whole thing could have been planned right back there in Hollywood!"

"It was," Wayne Cary spoke up. "I thought about it for months, and that's why I came to compete in the Shoshone rodeo. Cowfolks, am I the happy cowboy!"

He hugged Cherry to him, and glanced up when Ralph chuckled and held out his hand.

"That gives me the title role," Ralph said, with a chuckle. "I always was, and always will be a *real* Hollywood cowboy!"

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HONEYMOON ROUNDUP

(Concluded from page 83)

on down the arroyo like a suddenly released tidal wave. It was a churning, heaving avalanche that filled the narrow space from wall to wall and shook the very earth in thunderous concussion. Through the dust haze which rose up behind, Rosita saw the shadowy figures below running or shooting futilely before that surging wall of horseflesh which swept inexorably on. At last the heavy rumble of pounding hoofs had gone like distant, fading thunder.

In the astonished silence Rosita heard Eduardo's voice from above, and saw that he had crawled into the doorway of the hut.

"I saw the *bandidos* running," he exclaimed in awe. "Then—poof!—they were gone under the horses!"

"They will never return," Rosita cried gladly, thinking of José. "But alas," she added vindictively; "they will never know that there is no gold."

AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 10)

kind o' crime, regardless o' what it was.

So, the Russian sallied forth and stole a horse. His plan and the method he used in carryin' it out, was both amateurish and foolish.

He was promptly arrested and taken to jail. This was the handsome dreamer's last crime, as well as his first, in those parts, though some folks make the mistake o' sayin' he was a killer with eight men's deaths to his credit.

He died for his bunglin' crime o' horse stealin'—was hanged. It happened that on the day he was arrested a genuwine outlaw, Sandy King, was arrested for drunken disorderliness and shootin' up the town for the second time in a week. To save time and trouble they decided to try Russian Bill and King at the same time.

The trial was held in a hotel, and, unfortunately for the two offenders, the proprietor was just about to serve dinner.

The food sure smelled appetizin', everybody was durned hungry, so they hurried the trial o' the outlaws so's not to delay their feast. Quickest way was to sentence both men to be hanged. This was done pronto, then the meal was served. "Russian Bill" was sentenced for horse stealin', and Sandy King for "bein' a damned nuisance."

After the meal the table and chairs were moved over to one side of the room to make way for the hangin'. The noose was sus-

[*Turn page*]

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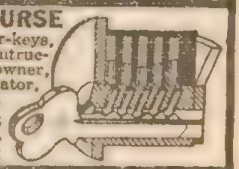

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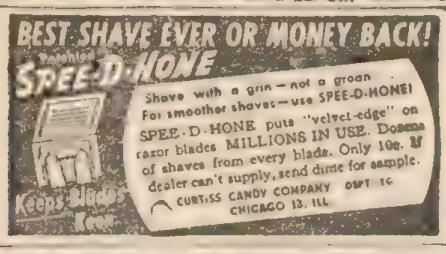

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pended from the rafters. Then both men were asked if they had anything to say.

Sandy King asked for whiskey and was given a big, stiff drink, then he took his hangin' like a man. Russian Bill, though, had no request to make.

They said he was calm, his handsome eyes steady with that far-away look he'd had when thinkin' o' his mother. He didn't flinch, when the time come, but died calm and collected.

His Identity Revealed

It was only a few months later that the Mayor o' Tombstone received a letter from the United States Consul at Saint Petersburg askin' for information of Lieutenant William Tatterbaum, formerly of the Imperial White Hussars. He had disappeared from Russia after wounding one of his superior officers in a quarrel and was last heard of somewhere in Arizona.

The missin' officer's mother, the letter said, was the Countess Telfrin, a lady-in-waitin' at the court of the Czar, and was deeply worried and anxious to locate her son. A photo was enclosed. It was plainly Russian Bill!

Tombstone put its official heads together and concocted a letter in answer that was typical of the sentimental side of the men of the old frontier.

It stated that Lt. Tatterbaum, long a honored citizen of them parts, respected by all, had recently been the victim of an accident resultin' in his untimely death. This, the men who had "respected" him and, incidentally, lynched him, sent off to his mother.

LETTERS FROM READERS

HAD me a friend from out in the cow country visitin' the office not so long ago. Back in the ole days the boys all called him "Curley" when we were both ridin' for the same outfit. Reckon that was 'cause he was bald as a billiard ball even then. Anyway Curley blinks when the postman leaves a big stack of mail right plumb on my desk.

"What's all them?" he asks. "We shore never got that much mail out on the ranch durin' all the years we worked there. Who wrote all them letters, Tex?"

"Those are letters from members of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB," I told him. "And a mighty fine bunch of folks they are too."

"Show me," says Curley.

So I let him look at a few letters. Soon as he reads them he's convinced that I been tellin' him the truth. When you new readers

see what the folks have to say I'm right certain yuh'll agree with Curley. And if there are some of yuh that haven't joined THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB then get busy and do it, *pronto*. Yuh'll find the coupon in this department. All yuh've got to do is fill it and mail it to us with a stamped, self-addressed return envelope so we can send yore free membership card to you right away.

Come on now, folks, gather around, and let's start lookin' over the mail. Remember we sure thank yuh all for writin' and joinin' THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. Here goes:

I just finished reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES and think it is swell. I am 20 years old, 5 feet 2 inches tall and have black hair and brown eyes. My favorite hobbies are dancing, movies, reading and writing and receiving letters and collecting scenic postcards.

Anne Gliozzi.
2227 Dundas St., W. Toronto, 3, Ont., Canada.

I am 23 years old, 5 feet tall, have brown hair and brown eyes. I like dancing, swimming, movies and roller skating.

Hilda Barnoff.
390 Glengary, Apt. 3, Windslow, Ontario, Canada.

I am 21 years old, 5 feet 7 inches tall, weigh 150 lbs. I have been married and have two children. I have brown hair and blue green eyes. I will exchange snapshots and answer all letters.

Mrs. Adeline Wolf.
Rt. 1, Farmville, Va.

I am 15 years old, 5 feet 1½ inches tall and weigh 100 lbs. I have dark brown eyes and medium brown hair. I will answer all letters.

Alice Louise Kranz.
R. D. 1, Butler County, Prospect, Pennsylvania.

I am 21 years old, have dark brown eyes and hair, 5 feet 6 inches tall, weigh 124 lbs. I love to write and receive letters, exchange snapshots. I write songs and some of my songs are being published.

Theo L. Jordan.
Box 132, Jennings, Oklahoma.

I have been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for over two years and really enjoy the magazine. I am 5 feet 6 inches tall, weigh 115 lbs. I have brown hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are collecting snapshots and all outdoor sports. I'll answer all letters received.

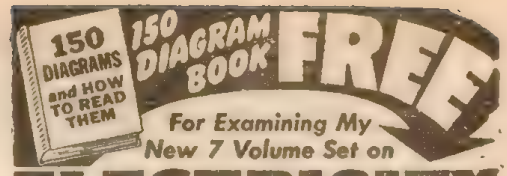
Jane Lalonde.
Foleyet, Ont., Canada.

I am 5 feet 2 inches tall, dark hair and eyes. I like all sport and love to ride horseback. I will exchange snapshots with those who write.

Pauline LaBell.
163 No. Pearl St., Buffalo, 2, N. Y.

I am 75 years young, been reading many different Western story magazines for some time and have just finished April number of THRILLING RANCH STORIES and an interesting fea-

[*Turn page*]



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ture "CHEROKEE STRIP OPENING" takes me back 56 years when I was stationed as Night telegraph operator at Edmond, Okla., for the Santa Fe R.R. Went there one week before D-Day, April 22nd, 1889. Was at the place for two months and transferred to Wharton, Okla. You're right—there never was anything like it in all my travels. Any old timer sees this, let's hear from him.

George Fisher.

Dover Plains, N. Y.

I have been a regular reader of THRILLING RANCH STORIES for years and think it is the best magazine on the market. My favorite hobbies are collecting pictures of my favorite authors, also collecting post cards. I am 18 years old and have recently been discharged from the U. S. Army. Have blue eyes and brown hair.

James A. Hines.

Horse Branch, Ky.

I am 16 years old, have dark brown hair and dark blue eyes. I'm crazy about horseback riding, my dog and cowboys. Will answer all letters.

Maxine Baker.

4175 Botanical Ave., St. Louis, 10, Mo.

I am 23 years old, 5 feet 4 inches tall, weigh 130 lbs. My eyes and hair are brown. Will answer all letters.

Helen Smith.

20 Earl Ave., Lafayette, Ind.

I am 5 feet 4½ inches tall, weigh 110 lbs. Have black hair and brown eyes. My hobbies are collecting stamps, picture post cards, movie shots. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange picture post cards with anyone who is interested.

Florence Gonsalves.

P. O. Box 296, Holavla, Hawaii.

I am 18 years old, have black hair and brown eyes, 5 feet 6 inches tall. I collect photographs of anyone I can get, and I promise to answer all letters.

Lois Angler.

Box 582, Lafitte, La.

I am 20 years old, 5 feet 4 inches tall, weigh 123 lbs. My favorite sports and hobbies are embroidering, skating, tobogganing and of course writing letters.

Blanche Crumrine.

4317 Homeside Avenue N, Robbinsdale, Minn.

That's all this time—but we'll print more of your fine letters in coming issues.

Folks, we're mighty sorry that we can't print the many fine letters that have come to us from members of the Armed Services—but we are omitting them because of government regulations. However, we thank all of you service men and women for yore letters —and the nice things yuh have to say about the magazine. We're proud to have you as our readers.

Everybody—please address all yore letters and postcards to the Editor, THRILLING

RANCH STORIES, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

YUH ever see the way a rancher that raises thoroughbred stock looks when he gets talking about a herd of registered Herefords? Don't try to answer, for when I get to talkin' yuh just can't get a word in edgewise. Me, I've often wondered just what a word would sound like if yuh said it edgewise—but yuh get what I mean.

But this rancher gets to lookin' and feelin' mighty proud when he tells yuh about his stock. He knows he's got something fine, so he is pleased aplenty. I feel just like him when I get to thinkin' about all the fine yarns we got lined up for the next issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES. Not that the stories are the same as them beef critters, but they shore are a reason for feelin' proud.

First comes THE GIRL FROM NEW ENGLAND, by Marian O'Hearn, which is a mighty interestin' novelet that takes place back in the days when most folks traveled westward in the covered wagons. Gail Eames and her father headed for California driving a couple of wagons, for they expected to settle there. Wayne Hamilton, whose father had once been Arthur Eames' partner, had

[*Turn page*]

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come to California a year ago to get things ready.

Wayne and Gail's father were joint owners of a general store in Grass Valley which Hamilton had bought. Eames and his daughter had made the long trip across the country from New England, and found it hard going at times.

When they reached Grass Valley Gail fainted and when she recovered she found a man was holding her up and he was dressed in mighty flashy range clothes.

"You're all right, ma-am," he told her. "This is the Home Spread Bar in Grass Valley. Your father's here, and I'm Rocky Campbell."

Coming from New England, like she did, where things were a heap different from life on the raw frontier, Gail had quite a time getting used to her new surroundings. Even Wayne Hamilton seemed changed when he finally showed up.

Just how Gail learns that the West can be a mighty fine place despite the dangers, and how she finds the man she really loves, makes THE GIRL FROM NEW ENGLAND a mighty fine yarn with plenty of thrills and suspense.

Next comes SENORITA WHIRLWIND, by Johnston McCulley. It's shore a mighty swell novelet. Seems that Carlotta Brecker was a pretty gal whose brother ran the Sprawling W ranch. There was a local three day rodeo in progress and the Sprawling W was out to win some championships.

Carlotta was interested in a captured wild horse named Black Satan. What the girl liked about the horse was that he had an unbreakable spirit. She had an unbreakable

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spirit, also. Some said it was simply bad temper, but it was a high spirit bequeathed her by her pioneer ancestors who had come to the Border country when a man had to be constantly alert and ready to fight day or night to live.

The Mexicans long ago had named her Senorita Whirlwind, and the name stuck. She had done nothing to live it down. As a matter of truth she liked it.

It wasn't until after she had talked to a good looking young stranger, and learned that he loved horses and liked Black Satan, that Carlotta discovered he was Clint Harway, a rodeo star who had come to the border town to take part in the rodeo there.

Lew Nanniger, who owned the Circle Bar outfit, decided to give Black Satan a whipping because the horse had injured a friend of the rancher. Clint Harway stopped Nanniger from beating the horse and the two men got into a fight in which the rancher was licked.

From then on Harway made himself a right dangerous enemy. After watching the way Clint starts in gentling Black Satan, and learning that he is quite a man in fighting for what he thinks is right, Carlotta just can't make up her mind whether she is in love with him or not.

The way in which her heart decides that problem for her makes SENORITA WHIRLWIND a novelet that will keep you guessing from start to finish.

Then there is THAT FRENCH DUDE, an unusual romantic novelet by Shirley Manners. The waddies on the range thought that the French count was just a dude who would scare easily—but Madeleine Ryan suspected they had made a bad guess, and the pretty Western girl was right. It is a fascinating yarn.

Last but not least of the novelets in the next issue is THE RANGE ORPHAN, by Stephen Payne. Seems that Lois Arnold shore finds herself in a heap of trouble, what with trying to save her uncle from the owlhoot trail and the man she loves from paying for a mistaken bank robbery. There is action and romance galore in this one.

And that's not all. There will be plenty of other romantic Western yarns and interesting features in the next issue—entertainment for everyone! See you all then, folks.

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City, State.....

Free for Asthma During Winter

If you suffer with those terrible attacks of Asthma when it is cold and damp; if raw, Wintry winds make you choke as if each gasp for breath was the very last; if restful sleep is impossible because of the struggle to breathe; if you feel the disease is slowly wearing your life away, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Co. for a free trial of a remarkable method. No matter where you live or whether you have any faith in any remedy under the Sun, send for this free trial. If you have suffered for a lifetime and tried everything you could learn of without relief; even if you are utterly discouraged, do not abandon hope but send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing. Address

FRONTIER ASTHMA CO.

444-S Frontier Bldg

462 Niagara Street Buffalo 1, New York

WILL YOU WEAR THIS SUIT

and Make up to $12 in a Day!

You can get this fine, tailored-to-measure suit for yourself, without paying one penny cash, by taking a few orders from friends. My plan also helps you make up to $12 in a day without experience or house-to-house canvassing. Big opportunity—full or spare time. Send for Samples — FREE! Write today for FREE CLOTH SAMPLES and "sure-fire" money-making plans. For quick action write fully giving age, etc. Send no money. H. J. Collin, PROGRESS TAILORING CO., 500 So. Throop St., Dept. B-377, Chicago 7, Ill.

METAL Watch Band ONLY $1.98

New! Stainless Steel! Ideal for men. Overcomes leather's faults. Handsome, comfortable, rust and stain-proof. Always looks new. Fits any wrist. SEND NO MONEY. Pay on arrival plus fees. Or send $1.98 for prepaid shipment. 7-day money-back guarantee.

PROGRESSIVE PRODUCTS, Box TG-302, Madeira, O.

TOOTHACHE? DUE TO CAVITY

QUICK, amazing relief with Dent's Tooth Gum or Dent's Tooth Drops! "Cavity toothache" frequently strikes at night. Be prepared. Get either package from your druggist today. Keep it handy. Follow easy directions on box. 25¢

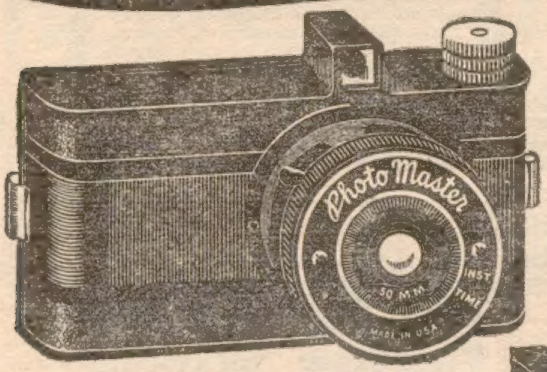
DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS

SIMPLE EARACHE? Get swift relief from pain due to superficial ear conditions—with Dent's Ear Drops. Follow easy directions. If your druggist does not have these products, better order today from C. S. Dent & Co., Cincinnati 14, Ohio.

DENT'S EAR DROPS 50¢

Calling All Camera Fans!

Genuine Photo Master CANDID CAMERA



The Ideal Gift For Mother, Dad, Sis or Brother

$3.98 POST PAID

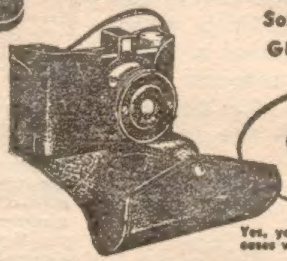
TAKE PICTURES YOU WILL TREASURE!

Imagine getting a genuine Photo Master with a *ground and pitch polished lens* in the face of one of the most drastic camera shortages in our history! A camera designed to take pictures in *full color* as well as black and white! A camera that will enable you to graphically record the events and people of the present for you to enjoy in the future. Yes, start today to take pictures of things as they happen. It's a real thrill that will bring you reflected pleasures for years to come. So order your Photo Master *now!* And if after the postman delivers it you don't think the $3.98 you paid for it is the best $3.98 you've ever spent—return it within 10 days and we'll refund your money cheerfully—and *quick as a flash!*

Sold on a "Examine At Our Risk" GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION

Look At These Features

- ★ Genuine Simpson Ground Pitch Polished Lens
- ★ Extremely Simple, Foolproof Operation
- ★ Takes 16 Pictures on any Standard No. 127 Film
- ★ Also Takes Excellent Pictures in Full Color
- ★ Level View Finder



This Made-To-Measure **CARRYING CASE** only **2c** with purchase of Camera

Yes, you can have one of these made-to-measure carrying cases worth 75c for only 2c with every camera ordered.

Biggest Smokers' Value Ever!

WINDPROOF LIGHTER and CIGARETTE CASE

Both For Only . . . $2.98 POST PAID TAX FREE

For Your Smoking Pleasure
A THRILL BY THEMSELVES...
. . . A TRIUMPH TOGETHER

Take the lighter, for instance! It's a genuine "Feather Lite," cased in gleaming heat resistant black plastic. Famed for the instant, positive action it's the favorite "flame" of smokers the nation over. Just a twirl of your thumb lights it—and its wind guard *keeps it lit.* And if you want the joy of a firm packed cigarette *all* the time, your answer is the matching featherweight cigarette case with its patented grooves that protect each and every cigarette until you're ready to smoke it. They're a peach of a pair, both yours to own for only $2.98—a price you'd gladly pay for either one. Seeing is believing! and if you don't think you've bought a double value after seeing your thrilling twosome—we'll refund your money *cheerfully!* And that's a promise!

A Matched Set You'll Be Proud To Give or Get

Both Personalized G B

With a Rich Silver on Black **MONOGRAMMED INITIAL** of your own choice

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR SMOKER SET

NATIONAL NOVELTIES—Dept. R88
608 So. Dearborn St.—Chicago 5, Ill.

PRINT INITIAL IN THIS BOX ☐

Please rush Feather Lite Windproof Lighter and Matching Cigarette Case personalized with initial printed in box above.

CHECK ONE

☐ I am enclosing $2.98. Send My Personalized Smoker Set Postpaid.
☐ Send my Personalized Smoker Set C.O.D. I will pay postman $2.98 plus postage.

Name_____
Please Print Clearly.
Address_____
City_____ Zone____ State_____

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR CAMERA

NATIONAL NOVELTIES—Dept. PC134
608 South Dearborn St.—Chicago 5, Ill.

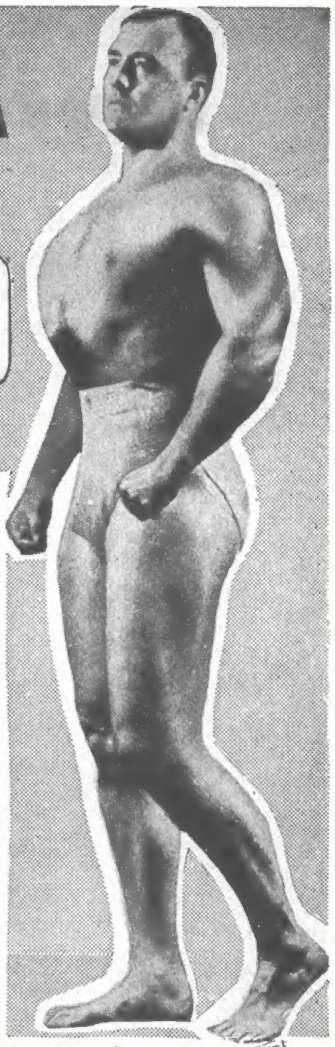
Rush Photomaster at $3.98 with Carrying Case for only 2c extra. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back if returned within 10 days.

CHECK ONE

☐ I am enclosing $4 for payment in full. Send Camera and Case Postpaid.
☐ Send Camera and Case C.O.D. I will pay postman $4 plus postage costs.
If you want 3 rolls of No. 127 Film (enough for 48 pictures) for only 81c plus 15c postage and handling costs CHECK BELOW.
☐ I am enclosing $4.96 for payment in full. Include 3 rolls of Film postpaid.
☐ Include 3 rolls of Film C.O.D. I will pay postman $4.96 plus postage.

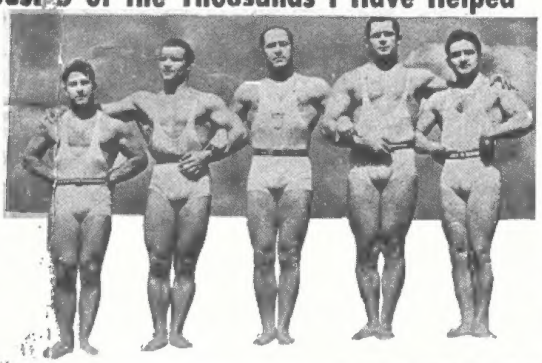
Name_____
Please Print Clearly.
Address_____
City_____ Zone____ State_____

I Can Give You A SUPER BUILD



Have you ever wished you were as strong as Samson? Have the strength to tear down buildings. . . slay mighty armies single-handed. Well, Bob Hoffman can't perform these miracles but he can give you real SUPER-STRENGTH with the kind of muscles you see on real champion strong men. Bulging, mighty arms and a mid-section that will stand the hardest punches of your friends. Bob Hoffman has trained thousands of men and boys who were weaklings and developed them into real "he" men. Jules Bacon, the "Mr. America" of 1944. . Steve Stanko, one of the world's strongest men . . and Gord Venables, who can lift 275 pounds over his head 25 times are just three of the famous names who have trained with Bob Hoffman Instruction Course. You can have the same dynamic, forceful muscles of these men by just mailing the coupon below. Start today to be a real "he" man. . one distinguished wherever he goes . . . one who will amaze people with feats of strength.

Just 5 of the Thousands I Have Helped



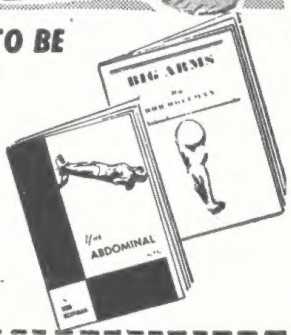
Special FREE

With Your Order

"ROAD TO SUPER-STRENGTH."

Bob Hoffman's own book showing you the results of others. Filled with pictures of the kind of man Bob Hoffman develops . . . men who were weaklings yesterday and today are pillars of strength. You'll want this book for your very own and here's your chance to receive it FREE!

MAKE YOURSELF THE MAN YOU WANT TO BE



It's time to start! Stop dreaming of building castles and do something about it! Write today for this complete muscle foundation course of Arm and Abdominal Instructions and begin building your body into a high-powered, potent muscular physique. The kind of figure that draws the admiration of everyone on the beach or street. Each course is a tried and proven successful method of training. Time?? . . . no it doesn't take years . . . just a few minutes a day for a few months and even at the end of a few weeks you'll be noticing a difference. Cost?? . . . only $1.00 for the 2 complete courses.

IT COSTS YOU NOTHING UNLESS SATISFIED!

Bob Hoffman wants you to be a man or pay nothing. His Arm and Abdominal Instruction Course is now offered at a special low price of only $1.00 complete. You can examine this course and try it for five days FREE! If at the end of that time you feel it will never help you then return it to Bob Hoffman and he will refund your $1.00, a fair and square offer.

BOB HOFFMAN, Dept.3802York, Pa.

BOB HOFFMAN, Dept. 3802
YORK, PA.

Dear Bob: Send me your illustrated Abdominal Course and the illustrated Arm Developing Course. Also include a free copy of "THE ROAD TO SUPER-STRENGTH". I enclose $1.00. It is understood that all of this is mine to keep and there is nothing more to pay . . . If I am not satisfied, I may return within 5 days and you will refund my dollar.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY & ZONE.....**STATE**.....

Don't Miss Anything!

8 POWER MAGNIFYING TELESCOPE

See the PLAY BY PLAY Action CLOSE-UP!

COMPACT-FOLDING

Styled Like the Army and Navy Telescopes!

Now you too can own a real telescope! One that's military styled just like those used on battleships and fighting fronts. It's amazing the action and close-up pictures you get through this powerful 8 power telescope. Just like having a front seat all the time. Folds compactly into 12 inches and the three sections open to 18 inches long . . .making it easy to carry and easy to see through in any kind of crowd. Wherever you go . . . carry this telescope with you.

HELPS YOU SEE 8 TIMES MORE THAN NORMAL VISION

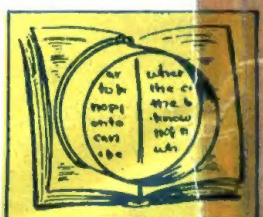
Don't miss any of the fast action even if you are sitting in the last row. With this powerful little telescope you can easily keep your eye on the ball . . . see the knock-out punch . . . get a good look at the home coming hero . . . and for hunting it's swell for spotting game. There are hundreds of times you can use a telescope when you're too far away to see normally. You'll agree that the $1.98 invested in this telescope was the best you ever made. Fill out and mail the coupon now!

PRECISION GROUND LENSES

Each magnifying lense put into this telescope is precision ground. Accuracy is the keynote in grinding the same as making the lense for a pair of glasses. Each is flawlessly clear so that vision will not be hampered in any way. We guarantee their clearness.

PLASTIC ENDS AND TUBING

Sturdy construction to make this telescope lasting has been built-in. This isn't a toy but a practical, well-made telescope. The ends and sliding sections are made of plastic to insure long-lasting use. All joints are plastic . . . making them non-destructible. A real buy!



MAGNIFYING GLASS ATTACHMENT

A powerful magnifying glass attachment is right on your telescope. The large end is removable and the lense forms your magnifying glass. Handy to use for reading, stamp collections, etc.

5 Day Examination

FREE

You must be satisfied . . . that's why we make this offer. You examine this telescope for 5 days and then if you don't feel it's worth $1.98 you may return it to us and we will refund your money. A fair bargain.

INVENCO CORP., Dept. PT-2
P. O. Box 281, Church St. Annex
New York 8, N. Y.

Your telescope sounds like a good buy. Please send me mine by return mail. Enclosed find $1.98 in ☐ check, ☐ money order. ☐ C.O.D. (I agree to pay postage on C.O.D. orders). If I am not satisfied, I may return the telescope within 5 days and my money will be refunded.

NAME.....

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CITY, ZONE & STATE .....

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